

WHAT KIND OF FAMILY?

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 44:1–45:15

Tenth Message

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Genesis 44:1–45:15

Family.

What kind of image does that word bring to mind? Families can be the best of things. And families can be the worst of things. People have a lot to say about what family is all about. Here are some quotes I found about family.

There's the Hallmark version: "Families are like branches on a tree. We grow in different directions, but our roots remain the same."

Here's the pandemic version: "If you want to call a family meeting, just turn off the WiFi router and wait in the room where it is located."

And the funny versions: "My family is temperamental. Half temper. Half mental." Or from the infamous George Burns: "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city."

Some of us can relate to one of those quotes. Some of us may even be able to relate to all of them. Family is, in a word, complicated.

And then you come to church. You follow Jesus and become a Christian. And we talk about being the family of God. What does that mean? What kind of family are we?

We're in the midst of a sermon series on the life of Joseph. But we pointed out at the beginning of this series that the biblical story of Joseph is not just the story of Joseph. It begins with the words, "The generations of Jacob." This is the story of Jacob and his family.

At the beginning of the story, we saw a horrendously dysfunctional family. Favoritism. Arrogance. Jealousy. Sexual sin. Lying. Hypocrisy. Attempted murder. This is the kind of family that the generations of Jacob started out as. But as the story has progressed, it seems like some things have changed. What kind of a family are they now, at this point in the story? What kind of a family are they becoming?

This is important because of something Scott Grant pointed out a few weeks ago. For those of us who believe in Jesus, we are the family of Abraham. This is not just a random family from four thousand years. This is our family.

But it's not just our family. In the biblical story, this is THE family. This family is the model for the world. This family will save the world. At the end of the story, this family will rule the world.

If the church is supposed to be the family of God, then we need to be honest. Right now, our family doesn't have a great reputation. People look at us and see some of the same things we saw in Jacob's early family. Favoritism. Arrogance. Rage. Sexual Sin. Hypocrisy. And while some of that is undeserved, much of it is fair.

If we're supposed to be the family of God, what kind of family are we supposed to be?

Today we're looking at Genesis 44:1–45:15. This section is the turning point in the story of Jacob's family. This is where we find out what kind of family they are.

As we listen to this story, I want us to keep asking three questions. First, what kind of family is Jacob's family? We'll see some strong themes. Our second question is to consider what kind of family you come from. Our earthly family has given us the most concrete picture of what it means to be a family. But finally, I want us to consider the family of God. What kind of family are we? What kind of family are we supposed to be?

The test

Our story begins with all the sons of Jacob standing before Joseph in Egypt, the second-in-command to the Pharaoh. This is the second visit to Egypt to buy food during the famine. On their first visit, Simeon was left behind in custody because Joseph wanted them to come back with Benjamin. Now they have returned with Benjamin, and Joseph has one more test for them.

Genesis 44:1-4, 9-12:

Then he commanded the steward of his house, “Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, 2 and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.” And he did as Joseph told him. 3 As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. 4 They had gone only a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, “Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why have you repaid evil for good?’

9 Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord's servants.” 10 He said, “Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.” 11 Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. 12 And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.

During the first visit, Joseph tested his brothers by asking them to come back with Benjamin. Now the test continues by framing Benjamin for a crime that he didn't commit. Joseph falsely accuses them of repaying his good with evil. This is a common biblical theme. It's found in the Psalms. David accuses a man named Nabal of it (1 Samuel 25:21). Jeremiah asks this question in 18:20, “Should good be repaid with evil?”

How do you respond when you are falsely accused? How do you react when you are trying your best, and someone misunderstands you and accuses you of wrong?

I heard a story about a young boy who came home and told his mother, “Mom, today in school, I was punished for something I didn't do.” The mom was angry and said, “That's terrible: I'm going to talk to your teacher. What was it that you didn't do?” The boy answered, “My homework.”

Most of us don't like to be accused of doing something wrong. But it's even worse when we're accused of doing something wrong that we absolutely didn't do. Then we usually get really angry. How do you respond when falsely accused?

It makes sense that Joseph would use this to test his brothers. This kind of thing frequently happens in families. In families, we often bear the brunt of each other's moods and emotions even when we didn't cause them. We tend to blame the people closest to us when something goes wrong. We often blame our spouses for our unhappiness. We blame our children for our failures and mistakes. We blame our parents for the challenges of life that face us. False blame circulates in the air of every home.

What kind of family is Jacob's family? How will they respond to this false accusation? What kind of family is your family? Do you falsely accuse each other? How do you respond when you are falsely accused? And finally, what kind of family do you want to be a part of? What kind of family is the family of God?

The test intensifies

Joseph has tested his family with a false accusation, but now he intensifies the test. Benjamin was discovered with the silver cup, so Joseph offers Judah a way to save himself.

Genesis 44:14-17:

When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. 15 Joseph said to them, “What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?” 16 And Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.” 17 But he said, “Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father.”

It makes sense that Joseph would use this to test his brothers. This kind of thing frequently happens in families. In families, we often bear the brunt of each other's moods and emotions even when we didn't cause them. We tend to blame the people closest to us when something goes wrong. We often blame our spouses for our unhappiness. We blame our children for our failures and mistakes. We blame our parents for the challenges of life that face us. False blame circulates in the air of every home.

Joseph has recreated the situation that happened twenty years earlier. Benjamin is the new favorite son. Jacob loves him so much more than the other brothers that he sent all of them to Egypt to buy food. But he was only willing to send Benjamin when starvation was the other option.

The brothers don't even know whether Benjamin is innocent or not. For all they know, he might be guilty. Only Joseph knows that Benjamin is innocent. So Joseph offers Judah a deal. Here's the key phrase, "Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father."

Judah can escape with his life if he's willing to give up Benjamin. He could go back to his father and say that Benjamin tried to steal from Egypt and got caught. Judah would be in the clear.

What do you do when someone else is on the line, but you're okay? What do you do when your friend is being picked on? What do you do when another person is being treated unfairly? How do you respond when others are mistreated?

I was on the math team when I was in middle school. Through an odd twist of middle school peculiarity, the school bully also was on the math team. So we were, if not friends, then certainly acquaintances.

We lived in a small town in Connecticut, and one day I was downtown with a friend of mine named Seth, who happened to be Jewish. Our downtown was a bit like University Ave in Palo Alto. I wasn't really aware of this at the time, but my town had quite a large Jewish population. I also didn't realize that there was quite a bit of anti-Semitism.

So Seth and I were downtown walking around when we encountered this bully and his friends. They started picking on Seth, calling him names. Eventually, they cornered him and were pushing him around. They started spitting on him. They didn't bother me. I thought it was because of the math team, but maybe it was just because I wasn't Jewish.

I didn't know what to do so I stood there. I was probably 12 years old. I watched these people abuse my friend. When it was over, Seth and I just walked away and went on with our day.

I wouldn't have passed Joseph's test. I could say that I was only 12 years old at the time. But honestly, I'm not sure what I would do today. There's plenty of people who

suffer today while I'm in relative comfort. Have I really shown that I'm willing to put myself at risk when others are being mistreated?

Will Judah pass this test? Would you?

So again, we ask, what kind of family are Jacob's sons? Again we ask, what kind of family do you come from? Are your family members willing to stand by while you suffer? Finally, what kind of family do you want to be a part of? What kind of family is the family of God?

Judah passes the test

Joseph has given Judah an extreme test, falsely accused, given an easy way out. How will he respond?

Genesis 44:18-19:

Then Judah went up to him and said, "Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. 19 My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father, or a brother?'"

Judah begins by reminding Joseph of the context. He started all this with the other brother. Now listen to how Judah refers to that father and brother.

Genesis 44:27-29:

27 Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. 28 One left me, and I said, "Surely he has been torn to pieces," and I have never seen him since. 29 If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.'

This is incredible. Judah describes his father by saying, "my wife bore me two sons." Think about that for a moment. Jacob has twelve sons from four women. Judah is one of those. But in Jacob's eyes, only one woman ever really mattered and only her sons ever really counted. Joseph and Benjamin, born of Rachel.

Twenty years ago, this fact made Judah furious. His jealousy sent him into a murderous rage, and he ended up selling his brother into slavery. But now he simply states it: "My father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons.'" Those words are wounding because Jacob has delegitimized Judah.

Make no mistake. Judah has a right to be hurt. He has a right to be angry. This is not how a father ought to treat his son. But Judah has come to a kind of radical acceptance of his father's wrongdoing toward him. He doesn't deny the pain. Judah describes it perfectly. He has found acceptance with the pain of his life.

Because of this radical acceptance, he can make this dramatic offer to Joseph in verses 32-34.

Genesis 44:32-34:

32 For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' 33 Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34 For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father."

Judah says, "please let me remain instead of the boy."

There is a trope in TV and in movies—that's a repeated storyline—that frequently occurs, which some people call the "Take me instead" trope. It's the story of the sacrificial hero who offers him or herself to be taken or killed in place of another victim. It appears in Harry Potter, in Black Panther, in The Hunger Games, in Shakespeare, and more.

This is the first occurrence of the "Take me instead" trope in the Bible. It may be the first occurrence in all of our known literature.

It's unbelievable. Judah is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his brother, who gets more attention from the father, who doesn't even seem to notice him. He cares so much for his father, even though that father has been terrible to him, that he's willing to sacrifice his own life to protect Jacob from more grief.

That's amazing.

Could you do this? Can you sacrifice yourself for others?

Judah has been transformed. We started to see hints of this over the past few weeks, but now it is on full display. Judah has become a different person. He has found radical acceptance with the pain of his life, and it

has enabled him to be the first instance of the sacrificial hero in the Bible.

What kind of family is this? Where the unloved son is willing to sacrifice himself for the rival of his father's attention? What kind of family is yours? Would you do that? Would you siblings? And finally, what kind of family do you want to be part of? What kind of family is the family of God?

Joseph passes the test

We have been watching as Joseph puts his brothers to the test. But there has been another test going on as well. The narrator has been putting Joseph to the test. We still don't fully know Joseph's motivations for everything he's been doing. We still wonder whether Joseph is out for revenge

After Judah's incredible offer, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers with an outpouring of emotion: "I am Joseph!". They don't know what to do at first. So Joseph says this to them:

Genesis 45:5-8:

And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

We finally know for sure that Joseph is not out for revenge. Joseph has forgiven his brothers. Not only that, but he is concerned that they might be distressed, so he tells them, "do not be angry with yourselves." Joseph does three amazing things: he forgives them, he invites them to forgive themselves, and he attributes their evil actions to God's purposes. Three times he says, "God sent me." God did this for his purposes.

So what was Joseph up to this whole time? Why all of these tests

We see an important aspect of forgiveness here that is sometimes overlooked in Christian circles. The brothers

told Joseph that they had changed, but he didn't believe them right away. In these verses, we see that Joseph had forgiven his brothers long ago. But he didn't reconcile with them until after he had tested them to make sure the change was real. He wasn't willing to enter back into a relationship with them unless they had changed.

Here's the lesson: you don't reconcile with someone who is actively abusing you. You don't reconcile with someone who says they have changed but whose actions say otherwise. You don't reconcile with someone who manipulates you, controls you, lies to you, and then tries to convince you that it's all in your head.

Joseph tests his brothers before he offers them reconciliation. Only after he knows that Judah has been transformed does he make himself vulnerable to them. He is not about to let himself be taken advantage of again. There is great wisdom in this.

Sometimes in the church, we emphasize forgiveness that we ignore the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is something that happens in our hearts. We can do that no matter what. But allowing the relationship to continue requires us to be vulnerable again, and we should not be vulnerable with someone who isn't safe. There is good reason to figure out whether they have in fact, changed before we let them back into our lives.

But Joseph has done this. He has seen the radical transformation that Judah has undergone. Because of that, he opens himself up to them. Only then does reconciliation happen. This is the kind of family that Jacob's family becomes. A family where transformation and reconciliation are possible.

Conclusion

What made transformation and reconciliation possible for Jacob's family is that one man offered to trade his life for the lives of his brother. If you're part of the family of God, that has happened because of another man who was willing to trade his life for the lives of his brothers. Jesus Christ has welcomed us into the family of God by dying for our sakes.

Because of that, we are part of the family of God.

The family of God is supposed to be characterized by the same two things that we've observed in Jacob's family.

The first is personal transformation. When you become a part of this family, you don't stay the same. You may come in as a complete mess. You may murder and lie and steal and whatever else. But being part of this family means that you begin a process of transformation. As someone once said, "I'm not who I ought to be, but I'm not who I was either." This life of faith is a life of change.

The second thing that characterizes the family of God is relational reconciliation. When you become part of this family, you become part of a community that learns to forgive, change, and reconcile. We will hurt each other. That's guaranteed. In this family, you will experience favoritism, selfishness, misunderstanding, and maybe even false accusation. But because Jesus is at our center, we can work through those failures together.

Transformation and reconciliation go hand in hand, just as we've seen in the Joseph story. Each of them is necessary for the other. Reconciliation can't happen without transformation. And transformation doesn't mean much if your relationships aren't impacted.

This is the kind of family that Jacob's family becomes. Judah and Joseph are both transformed. The brothers are reconciled to each other. This is the kind of family we want to be part of. This is the kind of family that the family of God is meant to be. What kind of family do you want to be a part of?

We can only be this because of Jesus Christ, who offered himself for the rest of us so that we could be transformed and our relationships with God and each other reconciled.

What kind of family do you want? What kind of family are we supposed to be for each other?