

## Joseph Part 1 – The Family Disgrace

The story of Joseph is a story about Grace. It shows us how the grace of God operated in a single human life, how it operated through a large and broken family and how it even operated in and between families of nations. It is a story that can never really go out of date as long as there is a need for grace and forgiveness among people, between families and indeed even between the nations of this world.

But for it to be a story about Grace, it starts in a situation that we might describe as utterly dis-grace-ful. When we observe the family situation of Jacob and sons then we can see just how lacking in grace this family and people are. I want to look at six short, little aspects to the start of Joseph's story and they are these –

- 1) A Disgraceful Father
- 2) A Disgraceful Ego
- 3) A Disgraceful Act
- 4) A Disgraceful Situation
- 5) A Disgraceful Solution

And finally I'm going to ask the question that I'm sure many people ask by the time they get to the end of Genesis 38, which is, "Where is God in the middle of all this?"

But first things first, let's look at number one, A Disgraceful Father. We looked a while back at the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a sort of lead in to looking at the story of Joseph and from what we know of Jacob and his family both from our earlier study and now, I think employing the term disgraceful to describe him is by no means overstating the situation.

From what we know of Jacob, with his cheating and lying, his trickery and his emotional games with his wives, you can see that it would have been an absolute miracle for his family to have turned out in any way well balanced or what you might call normal. (Mark Ortberg Quote?)

We saw in the earlier chapters how he seemed to play his wives off against each other, his manipulation now seems to extend to his sons. We were trying to think in the office the other day about terms for favourites in families, What would you call Joseph was he his father's blue eye? One of the men in the office had the term, "Daddy's special soldier" (Poor Kid!) The apple of his eye? The wee dote? wee pet? the wee brat?

In Hebrew the term used is "The son of his old age," that is probably not too far from the term, "wee dote!" His blatant favouring of Joseph doesn't just extend to giving him fancy clothes, he doesn't just build Joseph up in the face of his brothers, but he also seems to use Joseph to put his brothers down. He sends him out to report on them, knowing fine well that Joseph is just as likely to bring back unfavourable reports about his brothers.

Philip Yancey, in his book, "What's So Amazing about Grace?" refers to this situation of favouritism within families as a process of ungrace. Joseph is lavished with praise from his father but the others have to earn their father's favour in the face of unfavourable reports from their father's blue-eyed boy, Joseph.

Parents can't help from time to time having favourites among their children but when that starts to affect how they treat their children, when the faults of one are forgivable while the other has to earn their forgiveness, when love is lavished on one while the other has to earn their love then that is when that kind of situation has become a situation of ungrace, it has become dis-grace-ful.

This kind of situation is no good even for the child who is the favourite. Joseph seems to have suffered from having A Disgraceful Ego. Even when we know the end of the story and we can see his dreams as predictions of the future, we can only cringe as he relates his dreams, first to his brothers, and then to his father. His brothers see the meaning behind the dreams straight away, one day Joseph will rule over his brothers and even his father.

What kind of arrogance, what kind of naïve, egocentric, big headedness, must this young man have had to relate dreams like that first to his fathers and then to his brothers? Jacob's disgraceful favouritism has spoiled Joseph, giving him an ego the size of a small country. It is this naïve, big-headedness, this setting himself over and above his brothers that tips his brothers' hatred for Joseph over the edge.

Look at what they call him when they see him in the distance, they don't describe him as his father's favourite, Joseph, couldn't do anything about that, they call him the dreamer. They object to him because they fear that like his father before him he is going to upset the family rules and have the youngest rule over the eldest. They will not tolerate this and so this disgraceful family goes from bad to worse as their hatred turns to thoughts of cold hearted murder.

When a person, a family, an organisation or a society turns their back on grace then, as history has taught us, time and time again, there are no limits to the depths to which they will sink. Killing their brother is not too low a depth for Jacob's sons to sink to in their anger and their bitterness. Even when they finally persuade themselves away from murder it is not because they have developed some sort of pity within themselves but more because they are afraid of what God will do to them if they are found out.

Don't misunderstand what this passage is saying, it is not that the sons of Jacob were a particularly evil and degraded bunch of men, we just have to see how their consciences react to them later on to see that they are not cold-hearted psychopaths. What this passage is telling us is that even a godly family can stoop to the depths of attempted murder when they turn their back on God's grace.

This story is a warning against complacency. These are the chosen people of God, these are the sons of Israel, to whom God appeared and made his promises and yet even in this most holy of families sin is still working, breaking down relations between father and sons, breaking down relationships between brothers until finally the result is violence.

God stays their hand allowing their fear of justice and their greed to get the better of them and I'm sure the irony of the situation wouldn't be lost on the original Israeli audience that Joseph, the grandson of Isaac is sold by his brothers to some servants of Ishmael. It seems as well that inflation didn't seem to operate too much in those days. This is around 1700 BC and the price of a slave would only go up by another ten pieces of silver by the time of Jesus.

Look at the hypocrisy in verse 35, “All his sons and daughters came to comfort him.” I’m sure they knew fine well what would have brought him the most comfort, to have his son back. But having allowed their hatred and bitterness to draw them into this disgraceful situation they find that they are having to pile hypocrisy upon violence, sin upon sin, in order that they might cover their tracks and keep up an appearance of innocence before their grieving father.

What is going on here? It seems that God’s selected people are deselectioning themselves. The third generation after Abraham are turning out to be a disgraceful bunch of violent, heartless, fools. As if to illustrate even further how rotten, how lacking in grace this family has become we are given in Genesis 38 a strange little story which we can sum up in the words, A Disgraceful Situation.

A quick bit of background, in Deuteronomy 25 a tradition called Levirate Marriage is described. This still happens in many African countries today. The aim was to keep the brother’s name alive through a son that would be classed as his and provide someone who would be able to financially support the widow in her old age. It says –

5 If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. 6 The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. 7 However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me."

8 Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," 9 his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line."

This might seem a strange custom to us and very much out of place in our society but we can see easily what has gone wrong here. Refusal to provide children for your brother's wife and therefore for your brother is seen as yet another sign of this family breaking down. Deuteronomy tells us that to refuse to do your duty should lead to public disgrace. This doesn't bother Onan, he seems happy enough to use his brother's widow for sex but he will not fulfil his duty toward her as a brother in law.

After Onan's death, Judah is worried, he does not want to lose another son and so he withholds from Tamar her right to have a child, the text doesn't tell us explicitly whether or not he knew the reason that Onan died but once we learn a little of the man's graceless and hypocritical character later in this chapter then we sense that we wouldn't be surprised at all if he did.

Tamar turns out to be smarter than Judah, she outwits him and shows him up for the hypocrite that he is. Like his son Onan, he thinks that he can have sex with this prostitute that he picks up beside the road and not have to live with the consequences but little does he realise that he is unwittingly fulfilling the duty that he will not let his son fulfil. A disgraceful situation required a disgraceful solution on the part of Tamar.

Do you see the hypocrisy again oozing out of Judah? He says in all his self-righteousness, in verse 24, “Bring her out and have her burned to death!” It’s OK for him to use a prostitute but when his daughter in law is accused of being one then he becomes the righteous pillar of society, ready to apply the law that should also condemn him to her. But she is smarter than him and even he is forced to state that “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah.”

What a mess of deceit and hypocrisy and disgraceful behaviour! How bad must it get when the most righteous person in the whole story is the woman who tricks her father in law into having sex with her! A disgraceful situation and a disgraceful solution! Five aspects of disgrace –

- 1) A Disgraceful Father – Jacob
- 2) A Disgraceful Ego – Joseph
- 3) A Disgraceful Act – by his brothers
- 4) A Disgraceful Situation – caused by Judah
- 5) A Disgraceful Solution – from a desperate woman

So where is the grace of God in all of this? What is he up to? William Cowper the Poet and hymn writer tells us that *God moves in a mysterious way / his wonders to perform*. In verse 4 of that hymn we sing the words, Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / But trust him for his grace; / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face.

In earlier parts of Genesis God worked openly, he walked with Adam, Enoch and Abraham and he wrestled with Jacob but here he works silently, providentially, guiding from behind the scenes. He works through the worst of situations but always for the best. He protected Tamar as she pretended to be a roadside prostitute, who knows what dangers she would have met otherwise.

Through Tamar's would eventually come King David and she is also one of the few women mentioned in Matthew's record of Jesus genealogy. Tamar's disgraceful solution was used by God in ways that she would never know. God works in a mysterious way his King and his Messiah to be born.

God also protected Joseph in Egypt, although I am sure that it didn't feel that way at first as Joseph was bought and sold, as he was enslaved and imprisoned but we have the advantage over Joseph in that we know the story's end. God took this disgraceful egotistical big-head from the disgraceful family of a disgraceful father and guided and protected him by his grace until even Joseph himself would come to understand how God's grace had been operating even in the dark and awful times of his life.

God works in a mysterious way as much in our own lives as in those of Tamar and Joseph, his wonders can be the saving of a family of nations from famine or the birth of twins but he still works through us his secret or his public wonders to perform, let us pray that in Cowper's words that we can learn to trust him for his grace; that behind an often frowning providence he hides a smiling face.