

## **Dysfunctional Families of the Bible**

### **Session 3: Siblings**

**The problems within individuals leads to the breakdown of relationships between couples which often results in bad parenting. This bad parenting in its extreme can lead to trauma for their children. This trauma follows a person into adulthood and the cycle repeats. Additionally, the torments of childhood can affect entire societies, as we saw last week in the story of Samuel. One of the main fallouts of bad parenting, of course, is problems between siblings.**

**We've all heard about sibling rivalry, often hearing about it so frequently that the phrase is diminished in meaning. But as Biblical stories tell us, we should never underestimate the damage siblings can inflict upon one another, generally as the result of bad parenting.**

**The Bible pointedly warns us of the dangers of sibling rivalry in Genesis 4. Cain and Abel, the metaphorical first children of the metaphorical first people, Eve and Adam, have grown into adults. Cain is a farmer and Abel is a shepherd. Each brings their offerings to God, but for unexplained reasons, YHWH accepts Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's. Understandably, Cain is upset. However, God comforts**

him, telling him that if he “acts rightly” he will be “lifted up” (Genesis 4:6). This statement of God’s seems to imply that whatever led to the rejection of Cain’s sacrifice can easily be repaired or that perhaps the sacrifice issue is not important at all. What matters is Cain’s response to it.

Unfortunately, Cain does not listen to God. He lures his younger brother into a field (where he holds power, as he is a farmer), and kills him. The consequences of broken relationships have escalated into the violence of murder.

Although the murder of one sibling by another is extremely rare, accounting for only 2% of all murders,<sup>1</sup> abuse and violence between siblings is tragically more common.<sup>2</sup> Despite the rarity of actual murder between siblings, we should note that the Biblical authors chose to depict humanity’s first murder as a fratricide.

The family is supposed to be a safe place, a person’s haven from the struggles of the world, a place of refuge. One’s family is supposed to protect them, stand by them, welcome, love them no

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<sup>1</sup> [Fratricide: A Forensic Psychiatric Perspective | Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law \(jaapl.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Siblicide in Humans: Homicidal Violence Between Siblings | Crime Traveller](#)

matter what. Especially one's siblings, since they are the ones who have experienced the same childhood, the same parents. We can look to Isaac and Ishmael as a positive example of this situation. They both suffered under Abraham, the father who tried to kill each of them in one fashion or another. The Bible tells us in Genesis 25:9 that the brothers reunite to bury father Abraham. Ishmael no doubt came from miles away just to make sure the old jerk was dead, and the two brothers probably toasted the fact that he was gone.

But other siblings do not unite. Not only do we hear about abuse between siblings, but other subtler forms of anger and resentment exists between siblings. We can see such scenarios played out upon the death of parents. Suddenly one sibling throws a conniption over Aunt Susan's lamp because mom had promised it to them. Before everyone knows it, people aren't speaking. In extreme cases, lawyers are called and wills are contested. Of course it isn't about Aunt Susan's lamp; it's never about Aunt Susan's lamp or Grandma's bracelet or that set of dishes. It's actually about mom liking one sibling better or because that sibling tormented the other as a child and so forth.

Two of my siblings detest me to this day because I was my dad's favorite child. Now I didn't get a single extra gift or privilege because of this fact. Rather, my dad talked me up behind my back to all my other siblings (I have two older brothers and two older sisters); but he never gave me any compliments to my face, just praised me to them. And the damage was done and can never be undone.

Last week we noted how Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob. We can see how this fostered resentment between the two brothers, even if each of them was the favorite of one of their parents and thus no one was technically left out. However when Jacob received the heir's blessing instead of Esau, Esau's anger immediately turned upon his brother rather than upon either of his parents when the parents were clearly at fault here. A possible reason for Esau's resentment of his brother is the fact that since Isaac loved his wife so much, the favor of Rebekah held great value in the household; Esau would have wanted her approval, approval that Jacob already had. And of course children don't blame the parent whose approval and love they want; they blame the sibling who has what they want. And just like how many siblings wait until their parent/s die before they strike out against their sibling, so Esau

**decides, “Let the time of mourning for my father come, so that I might kill my brother Jacob” (Genesis 27:41).**

**However, unlike Cain and Abel, the story of Esau and Jacob ends without violence. Jacob is forced to return to his homeland because of conflict with his conniving Uncle Laban. Each step towards his brother fills him with dread. He sends a polite message informing Esau that he is returning and that he is self-sufficient (Genesis 32:5-6). Esau responds by moving to meet Jacob...along with four hundred men (Genesis 32:7), terrifying Jacob. In a bid for some sort of survival, Jacob separates all his people and possessions, hoping at least part of his family and wealth would survive should Esau attack (Genesis 32:8-9). Then, he prays with all his might.**

**He sends ahead lavish apology gifts for Esau; then he does something that would set the stage for problems between his children. He “divided his children from among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went ahead of them, bowing to the ground seven times until he reached his brother” (Genesis 33:1-3). In phrasing that Jesus echoes in his**

parable of the Prodigal Son, “Esau ran to meet him, embraced him and flinging himself on his neck, kissed him as he wept” (Genesis 33:4). All has been forgiven.

Jacob’s sons, however, well remember the order in which their father loves them. We are reminded of this fact in Genesis 17:3 “Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons.” Now according to this verse, Jacob’s reason for this favoritism is because Joseph is “the son of his old age.” However, Joseph isn’t actually the “son of his old age;” arguably Benjamin, who had not been born at the time of Jacob’s reunion with Esau, is. Joseph is the eldest son of the only woman Jacob ever loved, Rachel. Benjamin is also her son, however she died giving birth to him (Genesis 35:16-20), so love for Benjamin would have always been tainted with grief for Jacob’s beloved wife. Therefore, it seems more likely that Joseph is Jacob’s favorite child because he is the son of Jacob’s favorite wife.

Jacob does something vastly unusual for his beloved son: he sews him a tunic with his own hands (Genesis 37:3). Israelite men were not tailors. Sewing was women’s work and Jacob had another wife and two concubines to perform that work. If he wanted a special tunic for Joseph, he could have had one of them make it for him; or

he could have asked a talented female slave to do so. But he doesn't, he makes his beloved child a special garment with his own hands (whether he makes the entire tunic or decorates it is unclear in the text, but the point is still taken – no father of his time does this sort of thing, especially not the patriarch).

Such preference has the expected result: “When his brothers saw that their father loved him best of all his sons, they hated him so much they would not even greet him” (Genesis 37:4).

Joseph himself does little to earn the love of his siblings. “When Joseph was seventeen years old, he was tending the flocks with his brothers; he was an assistant to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah, and he brought his father bad reports about them” (Genesis 37:2). Additionally, he repeatedly informs his brothers about the prophetic dreams God blessed him with, dreams that predict he would be greater than his brothers (Genesis 37:5-10). We can only imagine the joy with which his brothers listened to those speeches.

The Bible tells us their response. One day, Jacob sends Joseph out to his brothers in the field. “They noticed him from a distance, and before he came up to them, they plotted to kill him” (Genesis 37:18).

To most of us, that is a severe overreaction. But if Sarah is willing to kill Ishmael and Hagar to prevent Ishmael from inheriting any of Abraham's property, perhaps ten brothers wanting to rid themselves of a spoiled, bratty brother who's not only a pain in their rears, but might end up with additional property as well, given that dad already is giving him extra gifts, does not seem so extreme.

However the eldest brother, Reuben, dissuades his brothers from killing Joseph outright, planning to rescue his younger brother when the others are gone (Genesis 37:21-22). Instead, the brothers strip Joseph of his special tunic and toss him into an empty cistern to die. Then, they sit and eat lunch, presumably serenaded by the cries and pleas of Joseph.

While Reuben is away, the other brothers decide to profit from ridding themselves of their tiresome brother Joseph by selling him into slavery. When Reuben returns, he is horrified by what they have done. Nevertheless, he joins the coverup. The brothers kill one of their goats and cover Joseph's tunic in its blood. They bring it back to their father and tell him his favorite son has been killed by a wild animal. They did not expect Jacob's response.



**“Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins and mourned his son for many days. Though his sons and daughters tried to console him, he refused consolation, saying, “I will go down to Sheol mourning my son. Thus did his father lament him” (Genesis 37:34-35). Jacob’s sons were so intent on ridding themselves of their obnoxious brother, collateral pain never occurred to them. Just like any other murderer, they had no thought of the other relationships which would be severed by the death of that individual, the grief that others would experience upon their death. The brothers got their revenge, but they now are faced with a daily reminder of their actions: their father’s unending grief.**

**Despite the horror of what he has endured at the hands of his own family and the horrors of slavery, Joseph never despairs. When he is falsely accused of attacking his master’s wife and sent to a dungeon, Joseph’s trust in God remains strong (Genesis 39). When he successfully interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s officials who are imprisoned with him, but is forgotten by the one who is restored to Pharaoh’s household, Joseph’s faith remains unshaken (Genesis 40). We are told that God is watching over Joseph even**

though Joseph might not feel he always felt that way, given how many setbacks he experiences.

But, in the fullness of time, one of his companions from the dungeon remembers Joseph (Genesis 41). Pharaoh has been having nightmares and no one has been able to interpret these nightmares despite the fact that they are clearly prophetic. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, who had been imprisoned with Joseph, remembers his dream-interpreting friend and recommends his services to Pharaoh. Joseph, reminding all of Pharaoh's court that "It is not I...but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer" (Genesis 41:16). Through his God-given ability, Joseph prophetically informs Pharaoh of the upcoming periods of bounty and famine coming to Egypt. In response, Pharaoh names him, in effect, vice-Pharaoh.

But Joseph's protection by God and rise to power isn't the end of his story. When famine comes to Egypt, it comes to all the surrounding lands as well. Because Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dream, Egypt has stockpiled food. Anyone who requires food and has the means can purchase it, directly from Joseph.

One day, the brothers who despised Joseph and sold him, did just that. Only his full brother Benjamin stayed behind because Jacob could not bear the thought of losing his only other child by Rachel (Genesis 42:4). Joseph immediately recognizes his vicious siblings. They have no idea who he is. And why should they? They presume he is already dead – people don't usually long survive the abuses of slavery. Additionally, some twenty-five years have passed. Joseph is no longer a youth, barely out of his teens. Now he is a grown man, with a family of his own (Genesis 41:45). Additionally, he speaks to them in Egyptian, he is garbed in his royal official Egyptian garb, with his head shaven, his eyes lined in kohl, adorned in gold jewelry, and everyone in the room defers to him. None of his brothers could have imagined their discarded brat of a brother metamorphosing into the royal presence before them.

For his part, Joseph needs to ensure that during the time he has been gone, his full brother Benjamin has not been subjected to cruelty at the hands of those brothers. First, he imprisons them all for three days – which had to feel good. Then he keeps Simeon imprisoned until his brothers return with Benjamin, something which takes some time.

Eventually, Benjamin is brought to Joseph. When Joseph sets eyes upon his full brother after all these years, he has to leave the room to weep in private (Genesis 43:29-30). Joseph then has his brothers served a lavish meal, ensuring that Benjamin receives five times the amount of food that the others do (Genesis 43:34). He then sets up a ruse, planting a silver cup in the sack of food Benjamin is to bring home. Joseph then sends his servants to chase after his brothers to search for the “stolen” cup. When the servants reach Joseph’s brothers, they deny that they are thieves, swearing (stupidly) that if any stolen goods are found, Joseph can have the culprit executed and enslave the rest of them (Genesis 44:9). Joseph’s servant assure them that the culprit will be a slave and not killed. When the “stolen” cup is found in Benjamin’s bag, the brothers tear their clothes as a sign of mourning and return to Joseph with the arrested Benjamin.

Judah steps forward and presents an impassioned plea for his youngest brother. He tells Joseph how desperately their father still grieves for Joseph and how if something happens to Benjamin, Jacob will die of grief. He begs to take Benjamin’s place as Joseph’s slave.

**At this point, Joseph is convinced that in his absence, his brothers have not mistreated Benjamin and that they also regret having sold him. He orders the other Egyptians to leave him and bursts into sobs. He cries so loudly, however, that the Egyptians overhear and the news reaches Pharaoh (Genesis 45:1-2).**

**He informs his brothers of his true identity and they are so stunned that they have no reply. Joseph also forgives them and finds the good in the entire course of events. “It was for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here” (Genesis 45:5).**

**While we know that God never wants nor causes human suffering, we do know that God always brings good out of bad. A beautiful image of this truth is demonstrated in a movie called “Joshua” based on a book by Joseph Girzone. The story imagines what would happen if Jesus came and visited a modern small town, not in the fullness of his Second Coming glory, but as He did when He originally came to first century Judea. In one scene, a young woman whose husband had died, smashes a gorgeous crystal vase at His feet, telling Him that her life used to be beautiful like that vase but now, since the death of her husband, it was destroyed. Later in the movie, He sends her a present, a magnificent crystal angel made from**

**the shards of that smashed vase. That is what God does for us. God doesn't smash the gorgeous lives we have; we don't know why they get smashed. But when they do, God transforms them into something else that is beautiful in its own right.**

**Thus, despite the fact that our siblings can and sometimes do go out of their way to shatter our beautiful lives, God stands right with us, helping us rebuild our lives into something new and magnificent. And as God did with Joseph, God brings salvation to us and to others through this magnificent new life.**