

Recovering from Family Betrayal

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 16:13-20

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I stood in a courthouse parking lot with a man several decades ago. His father had just died and left behind a small estate. It was less than \$20,000. This man and his children were in a bitter dispute over the estate. I heard this man say of his own children, "I lived half of my life without them. I can live the rest of my life without them."

And he did.

This man died about ten years ago. He had been living in Nashville in a home for the indigent. A worker at the home called his children to let them know that their father had died. Someone needed to claim the body, the worker said. We don't want it, his children responded. But don't you want a funeral? Nope. Well, someone has to at least pay for a cremation. We won't do it, his children insisted. Then what do you want us to do with the body? Their answer: we don't care.

He got what he wanted. He lived the rest of his life and died without his children.

Family betrayal is especially painful. Some of you know because you have been betrayed by a brother or sister, a spouse, or a parent. When we experience betrayal by family, it becomes less about how or why we were betrayed and more about *who* did it. It was a loved one. A family member. Someone you trusted. The very person who should have had your back. Instead, she stabbed you in the back.

The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis is an archetypical story of family betrayal. It gets about as deceitful and hateful as anything we see happening today. But what I want you to see is that this story is about more than family betrayal. It is ultimately about how to recover from family betrayal.

Joseph was the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons; he was just seventeen years old. His name means "to add." He was *added* to his father late in Jacob's life, and

therefore Joseph became his favorite son. Jacob, you may remember, made him a special coat. The King James Version calls it “a coat of many colors,” which is not a good translation. Most newer translations call it “a long robe with sleeves.” Whatever it looked like, it was a sign of Joseph’s favor, and you know what favoritism does within a family. Not only was Joseph the baby of the family. Not only was he dad’s favorite son, the one who got the special robe. But then one day Joseph brought a “bad report” of his brothers to their father. We don’t know what the bad report was, but in essence he tattled on his brothers. And then, to complete his status as the family brat, he shared with his brothers a dream he had, a dream in which they all would bow down before him. You know, some things you just need to keep to yourself. Listen to this:

When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.... They hated him even more because of his dreams.

Okay, the stage is set. This family drama is about to explode.

The brothers saw Joseph approaching in the distance one day. The dreamer! The favored one! The brat! As he approached, they hatched a plot to kill him. Their own brother. That’s how intense the animosity was. They decided to kill him and then throw his body into a pit. They would tell their father that a wild animal had attacked and killed him. That would put an end to his dreams! Fortunately, the oldest brother, Reuben, intervened and insisted that they not shed any blood. Throw him in a pit, he relented, but do not kill him. I guess he thought starvation in the bottom of a pit in the wilderness was preferable to a violent death. So, the brothers stripped Joseph of the symbol of his favoritism, that long robe with sleeves, and threw him into a pit.

You may know the rest of this story. The brothers eventually sold Joseph as a slave, and he rose to great power in the administration of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He eventually put in place a plan that saved the nation from starvation during a famine. He even saved those same brothers who wanted to kill him.

Joseph was betrayed by his family. Loved ones. People he trusted. Instead of having his back, his brothers stabbed him in the back. But remember, this is not

just a story of betrayal. It is a story about how to recover from family betrayal. So let me offer a few observations.

The first is this: the worst can be done to us by those closest to us. It's not about how they did it or why they did it. It's all about who did it. It was family. The pain is magnified when it is family that betrays us. We might expect betrayal by someone at work. He might be aggressively climbing the corporate ladder, not caring who he hurts in the process. You happen to get in his way, and you get hurt. Those people are out there. We might expect it from a sports competitor. She's out to win. You're out to win. And sometimes the competition goes too far. Think Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan. There are plenty of toxic people in the world, and over time we learn how to protect ourselves from those people. But when the toxicity is within your family, when the betrayal comes from within our own home, it hurts very deeply.

When I meet with a young couple wanting to marry, I print out the wedding service for them to read. I've learned through the years that they are barely listening to me as we talk about the wedding and the meaning of marriage. And on the wedding day, they're going to be so nervous, they won't hear anything I say. I mean really hear. So I print out the service and ask them to promise me that they will read it. Here's what they will read:

Will you have this man/woman to be your husband/wife; to live together in the holy covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him so long as you both shall live?

I tell them that they will stand before their families and friends, before God and each other, and make that commitment. That's why it hurts so badly when it's broken. We are betrayed. Trust is broken. Suddenly you are a mix of anger, sadness, fear, and a lot of other emotions. Because the worst can be done to us by those closest to us. That's what happened to Joseph.

Here's another observation: the worst that is done to us does not have to define us. It didn't Joseph. He was more than what his brothers did to him. He went on to rebuild his life and become very successful.

The text doesn't address this, but I wonder how Joseph fared the first year after his betrayal? Maybe the first two or three years? When the text picks up again with his life, he is in Egypt in a cushy job in Potiphar's house. He had already become successful. But what about the first two or three years after his betrayal? I suspect it was pretty difficult. He was a slave. He probably feared he would be a slave for the rest of his life. I bet he felt like a complete failure.

Someone who was recently divorced once asked me, "David, is there life after divorce?" I actually developed a sermon around that question.

She meant it. She felt so low. So dark. So lonely. So much like failure. She had to learn what Joseph finally learned. The worst that is done to us does not have to define us.

One more observation, and I owe this one to a man who is arguably the finest Old Testament theologian alive today, Walter Brueggemann. He says this story reveals to us what he calls "the hiddenness of God." This story "hints and implies," he says, that One is working behind the scenes in this story. God does not reach into the pit and pull Joseph out. God does not smite those slave holders who purchased him. God does not overthrow the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt. No, God is hidden. Subtle. Working in a dream. Working through Reuben. Working through Potiphar and the Pharaoh. In this story, he says, God is a hidden Actor, bringing about good in the life of Joseph. (*Interpretation, "Genesis,"* p. 293)

Sometimes that is all we have to rely upon. You've been betrayed. Trust is broken. You're so low you fear you may never rise again. It's so dark you fear you may never walk in light again. And all you have is a slender thread of hope that the hidden Actor is bringing about good in your life. Hold tightly to that thread of hope.

You may never get an apology. There may never be a tearful act of contrition on the part of the one who betrayed you. Joseph got no apology. In the end, it's not necessary. But these two things are. Practice forgiveness. Eventually. At first you may want to extract revenge, but that is not productive. Over time you will come to a place where you can forgive. For your own sake, practice forgiveness. And then, look for the hiddenness of God, for the unseen Actor who is working for good in your life.

This is an archetypical story. It is our story. It's ugly. It's painful. But it's real. And it has a message of good news. We can recover from family betrayal.

Closing Prayer

Lord, it may be hard for someone listening to these words to imagine recovering. It's still dark and lonely for them. So, our Hidden One, give them hope. Give them hope that they can recover. Amen.