

# The Story of Joseph

## *Out of Control*

Part 2 – January 15, 2012

Well-intentioned Sunday school teachers do a disservice if they only cherry-pick the best bits of the Bible stories to create simple narratives and moral lessons and good examples to follow.

Truth is, *none* of the stories are simple. They're *amazingly* complex and messy because they deal with *relationships* (with God and one another). And the only real *hero* in the book is the Lord! Everyone else is pretty messed up! And *that's* the point. Over and over the stories validate the wisdom of trusting in the Lord with all our heart, letting go of control and leaning *not* on our own understanding when it would direct us away from His will, His Word, or His ways. Yet, each story also demonstrates how God has factored all of our messiness into his eternal equations, so that His grace can break in, again and again, to rescue us from our own brokenness.

All He wants is that you yield the right-of-way to truth (His Spirit). And all He asks is that you enjoy the stories, put yourself in 'em, and let Him speak to you through them.



Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. (Gen 37:1)

Jacob's father was Isaac. And Isaac lived, died, and was buried in Hebron (Gen 35:27-29) which is just south of Bethlehem. And this is how the story of Joseph begins; and it begins rather oddly.

This is the account of *Jacob*. (37:2a)

Joseph may be the central figure, but keep in mind it's really about how the Lord *uses* Joseph to transform a scheming, controlling, highly dysfunctional family into the nation of Jacob/Israel. Jacob tricked his twin brother, Esau, into trading his birthright for a bowl of stew, and then he fled for his life to his Uncle Laban's in Haran (Gen 27:43), about 400 miles northeast. On the way, God spoke to Jacob in a vision and said that all people on earth will be blessed through his offspring; (Gen 28:14) but he must trust God ... which is difficult for a control freak.

To "lean not on your own understanding" doesn't mean that you stop thinking; it means that you stop *fretting* and *devising plans* that violate his nature. It means that you yield your plans and understand to His whenever the two are in competition.

The Sunday school version says that young Jacob fell in love with Rachel, worked 7 years to earn her, and was tricked into marrying her older sister Leah. So, he works *another* seven years for poor Rachel who is barren until she's blessed with Joseph. Call this version of the story, my counterpoint to the flannel graphs.

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was *Leah*, [i.e. Wild Cow or Ox – in the nicest way possible.] and the name of the younger was *Rachel*. [i.e. Ewe] Leah had *weak eyes*, [picture Adrian from the first Rocky film] but *Rachel* was lovely in form, and beautiful [The OT way of saying she's "hot" ... don't picture *anything!*]. – Genesis 29:16-17 NIV

When Jacob shows up, Rachel comes out all VA-VA-VOOM, while Leah bumbles out and introduces herself to the coat rack (it's those *weak eyes*). And, not surprisingly, Jacob basically says, "How much for the *looker?! Seven years? DEAL!*"

[Seven years pass] So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, [Which suggests that Leah was an innocent pawn with no say in the matter] and Jacob lay with her [which suggests a lot of veils, low light, and way too much wine!]. And Laban gave his *servant girl Zilpah* to his daughter as her maidservant. When morning came, *there was Leah!* – Genesis 29:22-24 NIV

So, Jacob agrees to work another seven years, but he only has to wait one week, the "bridal week" celebration, to marry Rachel. And besides, what else has he got to do? He's getting wealthy at Laban's. He's surrounded by family. They're protected. Life is pretty good.

He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his *servant girl Bilhah* to his daughter Rachel as her maidservant. Jacob lay with Rachel also, and *he loved Rachel more than Leah*. ... [And] *When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved*, he opened her womb, *but Rachel was barren*. – Genesis 29:27-31

There's a big reason that Rachel's barren. God had told Jacob to trust Him when it came to his offspring; so God takes Jacob's rejection of Leah *very personally!* And that goes for us too. If you're married, God isn't *just* your Father; He's your Father-in-Law! And the animosity you have for your spouse is often also a thinly veiled judgment against God's failed lack of provision.

So, Jacob went for looks, but *Leah was God's choice!* The names of her first three sons' are inspired by her misery. She might as well have named them "Me", "Me", "Me". But then ...

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "*This time I will praise the Lord.*" [Leah's leaning on the Lord! Go Leah!] So she named him *Judah*. – Genesis 29:35 NIV

Remind me, which line did Jesus come from? Judah! As did King David! *This* is how we know that Leah (however it happened), was God's choice for Jacob. And Leah is learning to let go of control ... and trust God. Rachel however, remains demanding, jealous, bitter, vindictive, dishonest, thieving, and ... *cursed!* God gave Jacob the wife he needed, but he refused to love her and got the wife he deserved! If you refuse to love your spouse, you too will get the spouse you deserve. In fact, you'll help create 'em!

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, *who has kept you from having children?*" [You see: they *KNOW* God is behind it.] Then she said, "Here is *Bilhah*, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family." – Genesis 30:1-3 NIV

And Bilhah [BIL-hah] scores *two* sons for team Rachel!

Then Rachel said, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and *I have won.*” – *Genesis 30:8a NIV*

Jacob’s name was changed to “Israel” because it means “He struggles with God”. And Rachel shares this same tendency. The struggle, on some level, is *always* with God. Because God allowed the person to do what they have done; and God has allowed the situation.

And, In which division of competitive childbearing do two sons by a gentile handmaid beat four sons from a Jewish wife?! You know what she won? Control! She figured out how to get around God’s curse without Jacob having to love Leah, which is what she *knows* God wants! Sin is how we express our hostility toward God. And Leah sees what she’s done and says, “*We can use handmaids?! Since when can we ... ZILPAH!*” For those of you keeping score, Zilpah offsets Bilhah’s two sons with two more of her own! (Gen 30:9-12)



During wheat harvest, Reuben [Leah’s firstborn] went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants [a.k.a. love plants], which he brought to his mother Leah. – *Genesis 30:14a NIV*

Mandrake is in the Nightshade family, and was thought to possess mystical powers as an aphrodisiac *and* a fertility aid. That’s probably because they contain deliriant, hallucinogenic, tropane alkaloids (*they get’cha stoned!*) ... *and* because their nasty little roots can be very suggestive of human figures.

Well, Rachel not only wants to *have* the magic of the mandrakes, she wants Leah to *not have* it.

Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too?” [Apparently Jacob wasn’t allowed to sleep with Leah anymore!] “Very well,” Rachel said, “he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.” So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. “You must sleep with me,” she said. “I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” – *Genesis 30:14b-16 NIV*

So, on Rachel’s list of “qualities” I guess we have to add ... *pimp!* The end result of this is that Rachel gets the mandrakes, but Leah gets pregnant: sons #5 and #6!

Then God *remembered* Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. [God isn’t forgetful “Who? What?” The writer is making it clear that it wasn’t those *Mandrakes*. This isn’t the result of Rachel’s controlling manipulations, but of God’s grace once again being poured out on the undeserving.] She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” She named him Joseph ... – *Genesis 30:22-24a NIV*

How do *you* respond when God blesses you in spite of yourself? Just after this, Jacob leaves Laban’s and heads home to Hebron. Watch how Rachel responds to such an undeserved blessing.

When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, *Rachel stole her father's household gods. [Idols were used for divination and ... control]* Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. – *Genesis 31:19-20 NIV*

So, Laban chases them down, rebukes Jacob for not letting him kiss his grandkids goodbye (Gen 31:28), and then gets to the point ...

“Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But *why did you steal my gods?*” Jacob answered Laban, “I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. But *if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live.* In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it.” *Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.* So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. *Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them.* Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, “Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; *I'm having my period.*” **[Wow! She's good. She knows exactly what to say. “Okay, uh, keep searching, boys, just, uh, steer clear of the camel saddle.”]** So he searched but could not find the household gods. – *Genesis 31:30-35 NIV*

And she gets away with it! The idols are *never* mentioned again. Rachel holds onto her idols-of-control! We tend to hang onto (and hide) the idols in our lives that offer us a false sense of control ... *because* the Lord allows bad things to happen for our eternal best, and we really don't like *that*. So we like to have a “defense” against Him; even if it's completely impotent.

**[Fast-forward 17 years to our story:]** Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of *Bilhah* and the sons of *Zilpah*, his father's wives, **[He's been relegated to working with the sons of the maidservants; and he doesn't like it any more than they do]** ... and he brought their father *a bad report* about them. (Gen 37:2b)

The words indicate that the report *itself* is *bad* (i.e. malicious) whether true or not. Apparently Joseph got a “fix” of affirmation by running and reporting to his pampering father, because ...

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons (Gen 37:3a)

Time and again the pecking order of Jacob/Israel's personal preference was made perfectly clear. But never more *hurtfully* so than when the family caravan ran head-on into dad's twin brother Esau, who'd been “stewing” for 20 years over that trade-your-birthright trick.

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. – *Genesis 33:1-2 NIV*

Can you imagine how you'd feel if you were a child of Bilhah or Zilpah?! You dad might as well be saying, “Okay, I'd rather *you* die first, then you, then you ...” But, Jacob's fears are unfounded. Esau throws his arms around Jacob's neck and kisses him, and they cry, and they let go, and they move on. (Gen 33:4) But don't think those boys ever forgot their rank that day.

While they were still some distance from Ephrath [EE-frath], Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, for you have another son.” As she breathed her last — for she was dying — she named her son Ben-Oni [Son of my misfortune]. But his father named him Benjamin [Son of my right hand]. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). – *Genesis 35:16-19 NIV*

She dies on the “doorstep” of Jacob’s hometown; apparently not allowed to enter in. I do wonder what was in her camel saddle! Jacob had prophetically declared that the one who had hidden Laban’s idols would die.

And now Rachel’s firstborn, Joseph, becomes even more highly favored by his father, and even more highly resented by the rest.

[It was *painfully* obvious to those boys, that] Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age (Gen 37:3a)

Have you ever considered just *how old?* Those patriarchs lived super-long lives. At the end of the story when Jacob meets Pharaoh (47:9) Jacob is 130 (thanks, no doubt, to zero pollution, uncorrupted DNA, and the Mediterranean Diet). And Joseph *has to be* 40; because, he’s 30 when Pharaoh puts him in charge (41:46), then there’s 7 years of abundance (41:53), 2 years of famine (45:6), and about 1 year to relocate Jacob (46:5). *Now don’t get ahead of me!* Jacob was 90 when Joseph was *born!*

And we know that Joseph was born no later than year 14 at Uncle Laban’s (30:25) which means Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright when they were 76 (27:43). For some reason it seems less bad if they were just young men, but at 76 they’re still fighting for control.

And Jacob fled to Laban’s, fell in love with the young and beautiful Rachel ... and worked 7 years. I don’t remember hearing *this* in Sunday school, but that means that Jacob was *at least* 83 when he married Leah and Rachel!

In what world does an 83-year-old man complain that God is bringing him too many young women to start a nation with?! If you’re not willing to trust God in *that* situation, then *wow!* You are a control freak.

And now, Joseph is 17, which means Jacob is 107!

... and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. (Gen 37:3b)

Not so much a robe, as a “fuse” ... and it’s lit.