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OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

A STUDY OF THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

Abused and sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph could have lived a life filled with bitterness and hate. Instead he stood on his faith in God to save him, and eventually returned home in triumph to pardon those who wronged him. Disappointment can destroy a man, or placed in God's hands, turn him into more than he ever imagined.

The Men of Purpose series focuses on the lives of men in the Bible who provide poignant examples of Godly masculinity. Each of these leaders faced trials, frustration and failure, yet was inspired by God to achieve great goals. In a world where Christian male role models seem increasingly rare, this series reminds us that some of the most worthy examples of godly character can be found in the biblical figures who brought power, wisdom, and inspiration to God's people throughout the ages.

As you and your group approach each of these studies do so with the same spiritual passion, and personal integrity that has characterized Dr. Getz throughout his lifetime. Let the goal of every group meeting be this—that all attendees understand biblical truths, truths Dr. Gene Getz communicates with principles—principles that lead to right action. This is the supreme act of a disciple, doing God's Word.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While this Bible study may be used individually, it is designed to be used within the context of small groups. Each group meeting should include all parts of the following “three-part agenda.”

Ice-Breaker: Fun, history-giving questions are designed to warm the group and to build understanding about the other group members. You can choose to use all of the Ice-Breaker questions, especially if there is a new group member that will need help in feeling comfortable with the group.

One of the purposes of this book is to begin and to then solidify a group. Therefore, getting to know one another and bonding together are essential to the success of this course. The goal is to get better acquainted during the Ice-Breaker part of each group session.

Bible Study: The heart of each meeting is the examination of the Bible. The questions are open, discovery questions that lead to further inquiry. Reference notes are provided to give everyone a “level playing field.” The emphasis is on understanding what the Bible says and applying the truth to real life. The questions for each session build. There is always at least one “going deeper” question provided. You should always leave time for the last of the “questions for interaction.” Should you choose, you can use the optional “going deeper” question to satisfy the desire for the challenging questions in groups that have been together for a while.

To help connect as a group, it is important for everyone to participate in the Bible Study. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. The group members should strive to make all of the other group members feel comfortable during the Bible Study time. Because we all have differing levels of biblical knowledge, it is essential that we appreciate the personal context from which answers are given. We don't have to know much about Scripture to bring our own perspectives on the truths contained in the Scriptures. It is vital to keep encouraging all group members to share what they are observing as we work through these important Bible passages.

Caring Time: All study should point us to actions. Each session ends with prayer and direction in caring for the needs of the group members. You can choose between several questions.

Small groups help the larger body of Christ in many ways: caring for individuals, holding one another up in prayer, providing emotional support and in bringing new men into the body by reaching out to new guys. Each week it is important to remember to pray for those whom God would bring to your group.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

Begin by reviewing the following ground rules and talk about the importance of “sharing your story” (see below).

GROUND RULES

- **Priority:** While you are in the group, you give the group meeting priority.
- **Participation:** Everyone participates and no one dominates.
- **Respect:** Everyone is given the right to their own opinion and all questions are encouraged and respected.
- **Confidentiality:** Anything that is said in the meeting is never repeated outside the meeting.
- **Empty Chair:** The group stays open to new men at every meeting.
- **Support:** Permission is given to call upon each other in time of need—even in the middle of the night.
- **Advice Giving:** Unsolicited advice is not allowed.
- **Mission:** We agree to do everything in our power to start a new group as our mission.

SHARING YOUR STORY

These sessions are designed for members to share a little of their personal lives each time the group meets. Through a number of special techniques, each member is encouraged to move from low risk, less personal sharing to higher risk responses. This helps develop community and facilitates caregiving.

Only when group members begin to share their own story does the group bond at levels deep enough for life-change to take place.

A DYSFUNCTIONAL DYNASTY

WELCOME

Meet Joseph, one of the truly good guys of the Bible. Joseph seemed to understand that he was a man of purpose. He had an inner drive do the right thing. And it wasn't because his life was easy. It started that way but quickly turned into a series of catastrophes. Yet eventually, like a cat tossed in the air, Joseph landed on his feet.



ICE BREAKER

Everybody loves an underdog. That's why so many people want to see the Chicago Cubs or the Boston Red Sox win the World Series, Charlie Brown kick that football, and the rebels defeat the empire in Star Wars one more time on DVD.

1. If a movie were made about your life, which underdog hero would you be? Why?
 - a. Rocky (I, II, III, or IV)
 - b. Raiders of the Lost Ark
 - c. The Matrix
 - d. Dumb and Dumber
 - e. The Revenge of the Pink Panther
 - f. Other _____
2. What actor would play you in the movie you selected in icebreaker 1?
 - a. Jim Carry
 - b. Denzel Washington
 - c. Woody Allen
 - d. Jackie Chan
 - e. Ben Affleck
 - f. Other _____

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Joseph grew up in a family marked by favoritism and deceit. His great-grandfather Abraham lied and claimed that his wife, Sarah, was actually

his sister. He did this to protect himself against a lustful Pharaoh (Gn. 12:10-20). His grandfather Isaac pulled the same trick on the Philistines with his wife Rebekah (Gn. 26:1-11). The excerpts from Genesis in this study show us some of the dysfunctional behavior between Joseph's grandparents (Isaac and Rebekah) and between his father Jacob and great-uncle Laban.

²⁶ After this, his brother came out grasping Esau's heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born. ²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Genesis 25:26-28

27 When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could not see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." And he answered, "Here I am."

² He said, "Look, I am old and do not know the day of my death.

³ Take your hunting gear, your quiver and bow, and go out in the field to hunt some game for me. ⁴ Then make me the delicious food that I love and bring it to me to eat, so that I can bless you before I die."

⁵ Now Rebekah was listening to what Isaac said to his son Esau. So while Esau went to the field to hunt some game to bring in, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Listen! I heard your father talking with your brother Esau. He said, ⁷ 'Bring me some game and make some delicious food for me to eat so that I can bless you in the LORD's presence before I die.' ⁸ Now obey every order I give you, my son. . . .

¹¹ Jacob answered Rebekah his mother, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, but I am a man with smooth skin. ¹² Suppose my father touches me. Then I will seem to be deceiving him, and I will bring a curse rather than a blessing on myself."

¹³ His mother said to him, "Your curse be on me, my son."

Genesis 27:1-8, 11-13a

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters: the older was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had delicate eyes, but Rachel was shapely and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel, so he answered Laban, "I'll work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

¹⁹ Laban replied, "Better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay with me." ²⁰ So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my time is com-

pleted. I want to sleep with her.” . . . ²³ That evening, Laban took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and he slept with her. . . .

²⁵ When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Wasn’t it for Rachel that I worked for you? Why have you deceived me?”

Genesis 29:16-21, 23, 25

PRINCIPLE DEVELOPMENT

Joseph is 17 when we first meet him. It isn’t hard to imagine what those first 17 years had been like. Genesis doesn’t whitewash the family flaws of his grandparents, parents, and great-uncle who played formative roles in Joseph’s life.

It’s not an accident that the Holy Spirit chose to expose us immediately to some of this dysfunction in the biblical account of Joseph’s life: “At 17 years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father” (Gn. 37:2). What principles are there to guide us as we face our own challenges in life – whether we’re 17, 37, or 67?

PRINCIPLE 1

GOD SPECIALIZES IN CHANGING US AND CONFORMING US INTO HIS IMAGE, NO MATTER WHAT OUR FAMILY BACKGROUND.

His family’s sins definitely impacted Joseph. Lying, deceit, immorality, and manipulation dominated his family for several generations. If any young man had an excuse for turning out badly, Joseph certainly did. Still Joseph did not blame his family for his misfortunes. He could have easily blamed his dad, his mom, his brothers, and even his sister for the rest of his life – for repressed anger, lingering bitterness, persistent anxiety, fear of rejection, and a tendency to be deceitful, manipulative, and immoral. After all, he was reared in that kind of environment for 17 years!

The facts are, he did not blame anyone. This will become even more clear as we continue this study of his life. Joseph rose above the negative influences in his environment and let God make him into the person God wanted him to be. He let God help him choose to do what was right when family background pushed him in another direction.

PRINCIPLE 2

GOD UNDERSTANDS OUR PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES, AND HE WANTS TO HELP US RISE ABOVE THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCES IN OUR LIVES.

God's will does not include our getting bogged down with self-pity and other sin patterns. Rather, God works in our lives to eliminate such self-destructive patterns. It takes time – as it did in Joseph's life – but with God, all things are possible.

This is not to say that we won't be seriously affected by our home environments. I know some people who have suffered throughout their adult lives— particularly when they've experienced serious psychological and emotional trauma as children. Sexual abuse can be the most damaging of these traumas.

God wants to bring healing to all of us in all areas of our emotional and spiritual lives. But it can only happen when we follow God's plan.

PRINCIPLE 3

NO MATTER WHAT OUR FAMILY BACKGROUND, TRANSFORMATION BEGINS WITH NEW BIRTH.

Jesus tells us that we “must be born again” if we are to find eternal life (Jn. 3:7). The new birth gives all of us a new beginning in life. This is what Joseph's father, Jacob, experienced at Bethel when God appeared to him in a dream (Gn. 28:10-22). The ladder that reached from earth to heaven symbolized and foretold the coming of Jesus Christ who was and always has been “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6).

Referring to this new beginning, Paul wrote, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come” (2 Co. 5:17). We don't receive a new body – a new brain, a new set of lungs, and a new heart that pumps blood through our veins. Nor does our emotional and psychological makeup become totally new. For example, people who suffer from clinical depression may still get depressed. But when we become Christians – no matter what our physical and psychological state – we have a new identity in Christ. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our lives. By His indwelling presence and power we are able to live a new life, even as Joseph did.

QUESTIONS FOR INTERACTION

1. How did you feel as a child when adults seemed to favor another child over you? How do you feel now when you sense someone getting an advantage simply because of favoritism?
2. What happens in a family or organization when trickery or deceit become the usual way of relating and getting things done?
3. How do you think Rebekah and Isaac should have handled their natural preferences for one twin over the other? What does it say about their relationship that they let their preferences turn into competitive favoritism?
4. Jacob's objections to deceiving his father were more timid than principled. What do you think he learned about scheming and deceit from his mother?
5. Rebekah tricked her husband and older son on Jacob's behalf. Her brother Laban then tricked Jacob and Rachel on Leah's behalf. What should Jacob have learned from the humiliation of being tricked by his uncle?
6. What do you think it must have been like for Joseph growing up in a family with four mothers, eleven brothers, and one sister when lying and cheating were the expected methods of getting what he wanted?
7. What negative or dysfunctional traits tend to characterize your family? How is God working with you to minimize or eliminate them from your life?



GOING DEEPER

8. What do you think happens in our souls when we start feeling sorry for ourselves because our family backgrounds are less ideal than we wish they were?
9. Who has an ideal family background? How can the love of God and the power of community help us overcome our family backgrounds?
10. What does God transform at the time of new birth (2 Co. 5:17;

Ezek. 36:26-27)? What resources does God give us to overcome any negative family heritage?



CARING TIME

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all seem to have been oblivious to the increasing harm dishonesty was causing their family. In contrast, we need to accept responsibility to cooperate with God's Spirit in identifying and halting negative family traits in our generation.

1. Share with the group the changes that God has made in your life since you came to faith in Jesus. Are you thankful for those changes? Please explain.
2. Pray for one another that you will be committed to living godly lives of integrity and influencing those closest to you to do the same.
3. Ask God to add to your group new members who need to learn from the life of Joseph.

NEXT WEEK

Next week we will see how the dysfunction of Jacob's family came to a head. We'll look at the antagonism that Joseph experienced as a teenager from his older brothers. At first glance it may seem petty: Joseph's brothers didn't like him. However, God planned to use this outbreak of family jealousy to initiate a chain reaction of conflict and suffering that would transform this family.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

GENESIS 25:26-28; 27:1-8, 11-13A; 29:16-21, 23, 25

25:26 grasping Esau's heel. This is an early picture of the ultimate hostility that would become the rule between Jacob's descendants (the Israelites) and Esau's descendants (the Edomites). (Nm. 20:14-21; 1 Sm. 14:47).

27:1 Isaac was old. Actually, he would not die for many more years (Gn. 35:27-29). He was just taking precautions because he was up in years and losing his eyesight.

27:4 *delicious food that I love.* Isaac loved the wild game that Esau would bring back from his hunting (Gn. 25:28). He was asking Esau to prepare a special meal so that he could pronounce his blessing upon his eldest son. This was an important ceremony. Normally, all the sons received a blessing from the aged father (see Gn. 48—49). This word from God through the patriarch determined the young man's future. The oldest son expected to replace the dying patriarch as head of the family. This went together with the birthright that gave the older son two portions of the family estate, while the other sons each received a single portion. Esau was in line to receive both the birthright and the blessing, but he had already given away his birthright (Gn. 25:34). Apparently, he had not understood the importance of that act, and he still fully expected to receive his father's blessing.

27:5 *Rebekah was listening.* While Rebekah was pregnant with the twins, God promised her that the inheritance would go to the younger son (Gn. 25:23). The transfer of the birthright had already occurred through Esau's own lack of concern for it. God would have shaped the events as He saw fit and accomplished His will without Rebekah's "help." She did not allow God to work His plan, but instead schemed to make sure it happened. Rebekah resorted to deceiving her husband. Deception began as she eavesdropped and learned that the time of blessing was about to occur.

27:8 *obey every order I give you.* Jacob's name means "cheat" or "deceit" (Gn. 27:36), but Rebekah proved to be just as tricky and shrewd. She deceived on Jacob's behalf while Isaac sought to bless Esau. Their favoritism (Gn. 25:28) would hurt their sons.

27:13 *Your curse be on me.* Jacob seems to have feared consequences for this deceitful plan, thinking his father would turn the expected blessing into a curse should he discover their deceit. His mother harbored no such fear. She offered to accept the "curse," perhaps thinking there would be no curse as all of this would fulfill God's plan anyway (Gn. 25:23).

29:16-17 *two daughters . . . Leah . . . Rachel.* The scene is set for the cruel contest Leah and Rachel will wage for Jacob's love.

29:17 *shapely and beautiful.* Rachel's description is similar to Sarai's (Gn. 12:11) and Rebekah's (Gn. 24:16).

29:21 *my wife.* Jacob did not specify Rachel's name (apparently Jacob did not feel that he needed to; it was surely apparent who Jacob loved and wanted to marry). But Jacob's failure to specify her name let Laban take advantage of him. Jacob, who had deceived his brother out of his blessing, would be getting a taste of his own medicine.

29:23 *he slept with her.* As Gordon Wenham (Word Biblical Commentary 2, 236) aptly describes the scene: Jacob did not realize he had been tricked because of the “lateness of the hour, the veiling of the bride, and maybe a little too much to drink.”

29:25 *you deceived me.* The tables are turned on the one who had acted as a deceiver. Jacob had deceived Esau to gain the birthright and blessing that should have gone to the firstborn son. In an ironic twist, the rights of the firstborn daughter were imposed on Jacob, and he received Leah as his wife.

PERSONAL NOTES
