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### **Molding a Mess**

Genesis 29-36 (Background and intro to our Joseph series)

In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Lewis Jr. High I took an art class. One of the sections involved learning to work with pottery. I remember it being a rather messy venture, complete with watery, orange-colored mud flinging from the pottery wheel, and getting covered up to my elbows, splattered all over my art smock. Before the clay could be shaped into something useful or any sort of art, it had to be kneaded and worked and beaten on and water added until it was just the right flexible, moldable, workable texture. Then we could throw it on the wheel and begin to shape it. But even after we shaped it (I think I was making a flower vase for mom), it couldn't be used until it had been put into an extremely hot kiln and baked. It was the heat that made the clay strong and useful. But, putting it in the heat was risky because depending on how the clay responded it would either become rock solid strong or crack and break. It all depended on how the clay responded to the heat.

As I was studying the life of Joseph this week, I thought about the workable clay, fiery kiln and the mess. God delights in taking a mess, molding a mess, shaping a mess...even beating and working with His very strong but benevolent fingers. But we don't become fully useful to Him until we have had our character refined and strengthened by the fires of suffering. I don't like that plan, but that is what must happen in order to refine and develop. Rarely is there gain apart from pain. In the life of Joseph we see God at work shaping and refining character behind the daily circumstances of life; family dysfunction, privilege, jealousy, rejection, loneliness, deprivation, false accusations, temptation, suffering, honor, prominence, wealth, power, opportunities for revenge, forgiveness, restoration. Through all of it God molds and shapes and

beats and fires and heats until He the Master Potter produces a vessel for honor useful to the Master prepared for every good work (II Timothy 2:21)

Perhaps you find yourself this morning in the fire and heat. You are experiencing some suffering some pain. Perhaps you are being falsely accused of something. Perhaps a close family member has rejected you, driven by jealousy has tried to bring you down. Perhaps you are facing an intense temptation, so intense your flesh longs to give in. Perhaps you feel like you have been put out of commission, ignored, shelved and forgotten. It could be that you look at the family you are in and think that it is so messed up that God could never in a million years use you in any significant way. It could be that as you look at the mirror of your life you just see one big mess. Our study in the life of Joseph will be encouraging for us as we see how God delights in molding messes and shaping clay. **The question is this:** *Will we be flexible? Will we be teachable? Will we allow God to do whatever it takes pain or blessing to mold us into the useable vessel of His choice?* Will we respond in, humble, God-perspective teachability? If we do, then we won't crack when the heat gets turned up. As we begin our study of the life of Joseph: integrity in the face of suffering, lets pray. (PRAY)

There is something I love about stories of people. I love to learn from other people and what they have gone through; their challenges and how they overcame them. God often uses stories people; characters in the Bible to teach us to challenge us, to encourage and even to warn us. I love to read about the lives of Daniel and David, of Ruth and Esther, of Jonah and Nehemiah. The Bible, God's Word to us about how to live life well is packed full of people. I love the fact that the Bible doesn't candy coat their lives and leave out the hard things. The Bible gives us real people with huge weaknesses and also great faith. While we read about these people we get to learn great truths and it challenges us to live in that truth.

Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Two reasons we are given these stories is for our instruction, to learn and grow and for our hope so that we would hang on and keep on keeping on looking forward to our future when its tempting to give up and throw in the towel. The story of Joseph is one of my favorite and it too has been given to us by God through His Word for our instruction and to give us hope that God is shaping and working and molding us through these difficult circumstances to take us to a place we always dreamed we could be, to shape us into the character and people that can make a difference in His kingdom and a blessing to people around us.

Lets begin our Joseph series with some background into his family. Perhaps you have thought to yourself. My family so messed up and dysfunctional. My family has such a history of hurt and pain and conflict and lying and deception that God would never even bother to try and use me. Lets take a look at how messed up Josephs family was...and yet God continues to work despite the circumstances.

A little history lesson this morning into some of Josephs relatives. His great-grandfather was Abraham who married Sarah. This was the man who by faith, called by God and left his home country of Ur, right near Babylon, Iraq to travel to the promised land area. Great man of vision yet not without weaknesses. We learn in Genesis 20 that when Abraham took a journey with his wife Sarah south to the Negev where Abimilech was king. He told everyone Sarah was his sister (and technically she was a half-sister) because he was afraid someone would kill him and take his wife because she was very beautiful. Note the passivity and self-protecting character of Abraham. He was more concerned with his own neck then the lovely neck of his wife.

Abraham had been promised by God that he would become the father of a mighty nation. Yet, it wasn't until they were very old Sarah

gave birth to a boy named Isaac. Isaac marries another beauty named Rebekkah and in Genesis 26:7 we read that almost exactly like Abraham Isaac goes down to the same area in the Negev to live and tells the men “Rebekkah’s my sister” because he was afraid that they would kill him and take Rebekkah because she was so very beautiful. Again, God steps in and protects Rebekkah but it wasn’t because Isaac stood up in strength...he went passive and self-protective, caring more about his own neck than the lovely neck of his wife. Isaac and Rebekkah have twin boys; Jacob (that’s Joseph’s father) and Esau. Esau came out first. His name means ruddy or Red. He was a man’s man, a hunter, a Cabela’s poster boy. Isaac loved Esau.

Jacob was Rebekkah’s favorite. Jacob liked to hang around home. He was momma favorite. He also lived up to his name which means Supplanter or Deceiver. Jacob deceived his brother Esau at a hungry vulnerable moment convincing him to sell his birthright for a pot of stew. Jacob also deceived in order to get his dying father Isaac to bless him instead of Esau by dressing up in Esau’s clothes and strapping on animal skins to replicate hairy arms. (Gen. 27) As you can imagine Esau the hunter who was already ticked off about getting tricked into selling his birthright privileges as a first born now is livid at losing out the firstborn’s blessing. Jacob decides it’s time to leave and let his brother cool off a bit and so he goes up north in the area of Syria (Haran) to visit his uncle Laban. It was love at first sight when he first met the very beautiful Rachel at the well. He made a deal with Uncle Laban that he would work 7 years for him if Rachel would be given to him as a bride. Jacob was so in love that the seven years seemed to him but a few days (Gen 29:20). All gathered for the large wedding celebration, feasting and drinking. Perhaps too much drinking, a veil, perhaps Rachel’s older sister put on Rachel’s clothes and perfume because in the morning when Joseph woke up from the marriage bed “Behold”, it was not the beautiful

Rachael he was married to, but it was her older sister, the less than lovely Leah. Jacob the Deceiver had been deceived.

A lesson for us here is that how we treat people is the way we will be treated. Here the Schemer gets schemed. But we can also begin to see how a messed up family becomes so messed up. Its usually a pattern of sin that goes unchecked and gets passed on down from father to son, from mother to daughter. Deception, passivity, cycles of hurt and pain, self-protecting, revenge it has its way of squeezing into the lives of our children when we fail to deal with it God's way. We often think we can get away with it. Its not going to hurt anybody but the ones we intend to hurt. It won't come back on us. But often it does and often it affects the lives of our children who are watching our example...they follow...they get infected with our own mess ups. Fathers? Mothers? What model will we be passing down to your generations? What legacy will we leave? Have you been handed a long cycle of hurt and pain in your family? Will you be the one that breaks the cycle of revenge and deception and control and manipulation and deal with it God's way with forgiveness and forbearance and patience and integrity all of which demand huge amounts of faith?

Jacob is pretty ticked off and demands Laban to have another wedding to Rachael that very next weekend. Laban agrees to it as long as Joseph will agree to work another 7 years for him. Can you imagine the conflict and jealousy going on in a home with two sisters married to the same man, one loved and the other feeling unloved? What a messed up family to grow up in. Almost immediately, Leah began bearing children; seven sons and one daughter. It was years before the favorite wife, Rachel finally conceived and gave birth to baby Joseph. About this time Jacob decided to take his family back home to the Promised Land. (Gen. 30:25)

When they arrived at Shechem (remember this place as we come back to it again next week). A terrible thing happened to Dinah (Gen 34)

She is raped by the prince of the land. Her brothers are outraged and trick the men of Shechem into becoming circumcised thinking they will give Dinah to the prince in marriage. (The cycle of family deception continues) While the men of Shechem are still recovering from their painful surgery, the Jacob sons come into town and wipe them all out. Where is Jacob in all this? 35:5 “Jacob heard about it...but kept silent.” Once again the cycle of passivity continues. And when Jacob finally gets upset (Gen 34:30) to say anything, its directed toward his sons who deceived the men of Shechem, broke an agreement and killed them and their families are wanting retribution. Jacob is more worried about preserving his own neck then concern for the welfare of his own daughter. The cycle of self-preservation continues.

In the very next chapter of Genesis 35, To avoid conflict with the people in the area of Shechem, Jacob has to move his family again. His wife Rachael is pregnant again and at Bethel, she gives birth to another son, Benjamin...but tragically Rachael dies in childbirth. To make things worse while Jacob is still grieving the death of his wife Rachael, his oldest son Reuben (Gen 35:22) goes in and lays with his fathers concubine Bilhah...v.22 says all of Israel heard about what he did. But what did Jacob do about it? Nothing. Do you think you have a dysfunctional family? The family Joseph grew up in was majorly messed up. It gets even worse as we will look at Josephs childhood and teen years next week. You can just imagine the infighting and conflict and jealousy and control and deception and words stabbed in each others backs in that family.

Perhaps some of us can see how we have not been leading spiritually as we ought to have. Fathers. Mothers. The poison of passivity is so subtle and can slowly suck the life out of your family. It easy to see what happened to Josephs family. Can we see perhaps what its done in our families? One of the greatest tragedies is spiritually passive men in our families. We men are far too content to let the women lead when it

comes to spiritual things. We will let mom pray. We will let mom be the one who reads or teaches. We men have the most difficult time simply standing up in strength and being the one to initiate prayer. We go passive and its slowly poisoning our families. Passivity in men is poison to the families. Passivity blinds us to the present. We can't see reality because we refuse to act when we know we should. We put it off and become lazy in our parenting. We become inconsistent in our parenting. We may eventually discipline or act, but when we delay our action it is often carried out in anger rather than love and often driven because we are inconvenienced and upset rather than a true desire for our children to grow and become stronger and wiser. We are passive, self-protectionary and weak.

Is it any wonder we see the dysfunction in our families reflected in the problems of our community? In 1940 the school teachers list of the top disciplinary problems included: Talking out of turn. Chewing gum. Making noise. Running in the halls, cutting in line and littering. In the 1990's our school teachers listed the top disciplinary problems as Drug abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide, cutting, rape, robbery and assault. What will in be in 2210?

In the last 30 years the divorce rate has doubled. Children born out of marriage have increased 400 percent and is now celebrated as a famous actress announced her pregnancy to her model boyfriend. Teen suicide has gone up 300 percent. As we read in the paper last week the SAT scores continue to plummet downward. The number one health problem of American women is domestic violence. Our kids spend an average of 7 hours a day watching TV and only spent an average of 5 minutes a day with Dad. Dad's can we see how the poison of passivity is sucking away our strength and the strength of our families and the strength of our nation? Perhaps God is calling some of us this morning to stand up and begin taking steps to be an intentional spiritual leader in our marriages and families. Perhaps that looks like we men praying with

our wives, our children. Perhaps that means we lead them to church and make that a priority so that its not our wives that are having to drag us to church but it us that is leading the way? How could you lead spiritually this week? How can we reject passivity and lead courageously and be a real men this week?

Maybe its not all our faults we are so prone to passivity. Our parents and their parents and their parents all handed us down a model of how to live...some examples we have seen are pretty messed up. The cycle of family hurt and pain must stop. Much of it stopped with Joseph and you can choose to have your families cycle of pain stop with you. You can choose to pass on a legacy of loss or legacy of life.

Have you ever thought your family was so messed up that God could never use you? Think again. If God could use Josephs family then He can use you and me. The cycle of pain and hurt can stop with Joseph and it can stop with us as well. You may be asking yourself questions like; Why did God put me in a family like this? Why did God allow this to happen? Why did that person I trusted so much fail to stand up when he should have? Why was I not protected? Why am I having to suffer this right now? Why am I so lonely? Why God? Why?

Perhaps God is using those even difficult circumstances to shape and mold and refine and work you so that you will become a vessel useful for the master prepared for some really great works. Will you choose to see God in the midst of your mess? Will you believe that God delights in using messed up people from messed up families who are humble and teachable and ready to be molded into whatever God desires? God is ready...are you?

When God wants to drill a man, And thrill a man, And skill a man,  
When God wants to mold a man To play the noblest part; When He yearns with all His heart. To create so great and bold a man That all the world shall be amazed, Watch His methods, watch His ways! How He ruthlessly perfects Whom He royally elects! How He hammers him and

hurts him, And with mighty blows converts him Into trial shapes of clay  
which Only God understands; While his tortured heart is crying And he  
lifts beseeching hands! How He bends but never breaks; When his good  
He undertakes; How He uses whom He chooses, And with every purpose  
fuses him; By every act induces him To try His splendor out—God knows  
what He's about!