

Jacob and Joseph... A Study In Actions and Reactions

A Lesson About Actions and Reactions

Introduction:

Now let us examine a Bible illustration that shows the teaching results of right and wrong reactions. This illustration has to do with the family of Jacob and particularly with his son Joseph.

The narrative of Joseph in the Book of Genesis is not only familiar to many of us, it is also fascinating and full of rich and important lessons. It begins in Genesis 37, when Joseph was 17 years of age, taking care of sheep with his older brothers. In verse 3 we find these words: *"Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours."*

1. Here is the first reaction we want to examine--Jacob's reaction to Joseph. It is a reaction showing partiality on Jacob's part. He had twelve sons but only the two youngest—Joseph and Benjamin—were born to his favorite wife, Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob was 91 years of age when Joseph was born, and his partiality to this boy was immediate. Jacob, of course, was old enough to be Joseph's grandfather. So here was a proud, doting, affectionate and sentimental man, undoubtedly spending much-time with Joseph, since by this time the older sons were grown up and working out in the fields. Then too, Joseph may have reminded him of his own youth. Or Joseph may have resembled his mother, Rachel. Whatever the reason was, the fact stands out in bold relief that Jacob loved Joseph more than all his other children.

Here is undiluted partiality. This special place Jacob accorded Joseph is the beginning of a very sad story. Such parental partiality and favoritism is always foolish and evil. How many family circles have been disrupted because of this common sin. How many individuals have been marred for life because they grew up in an atmosphere of favoritism. Not only was Jacob foolish in being partial, but he was still more foolish in the way he showed it. He did not try to hide it. He made this boy a coat of many colors, actually a long-sleeved garment that showed Jacob intended to transfer the rights of the firstborn to Joseph. So as far as the older brothers were concerned, Joseph was supplanting them. Jacob's partiality and favoritism was proof of this.

Jacob himself was reared in a home where partiality was shown. He was his mother's pet. Together, they conspired to deceive his father, Isaac, and Jacob's older brother, Esau. It seems that partiality must be the sin we are afraid to mention. In all of my years of attending church I have never heard a sermon on partiality. Yet think how much favoritism there is in business. Someone is preferred because he *"butters up"* the boss, or *"shines his shoes."* Or a person is promoted, but not for his business merits. This is partly the reason for he saying, *"It's not what you know but whom you know that really counts."*

2. How about partiality in the church? Someone may be elected to an office or position because of family connections. There are many churches across our land that are controlled by a family clique and where persons are honored because of their relatives. They are honored perhaps because of their financial contributions, while others of lesser means are ignored. Some persons are pushed and promoted, not because of their spiritual qualifications or abilities, but because they know the right people. They shake the right hands. They are careful to vote on the right side. Thus a whole church may be controlled by

partiality. What a tragedy!

Listen to what James writes in his epistle: *"Dear Brothers, how can you claim that you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, if you show favoritism to rich people and look down on poor people? If a man comes into your church dressed in expensive clothes and with valuable gold rings on his fingers, and at the same moment another man comes in who is poor and dressed in threadbare clothes, and you make a lot of fuss over the rich man and give him the best seat in the house and say to the poor man, 'You can stand over there if you like, or else sit on the floor'— well, . . . you are guided by wrong motives "* (James 2 :1-4, paraphrase). *"If ye have respect [prejudice or favoritism] to persons, ye commit sin"* (v. 9). These are strong and pointed words regarding this very common sin!

3. Partiality, of course, does its deadliest work in home and family relations. It is always disastrous when a child suspects that his parent is not fair. A favorite child is likely to become smug and complacent, while the less favored one tends to become discouraged and morose. Never in a home and family should comparisons be made concerning the children. Yet, many of us parents are guilty of comparing one with another, and one child's accomplishments with another's lack of accomplishments. Nothing so destroys initiative and encourages a feeling of inferiority in an individual as comparing him unfavorably with someone else.

In fact, the Bible says we should never compare ourselves with others, because this is not wise. Neither then should we ever compare our children with other children in the family or outside the family. How often one child is recognized for accomplishment but another is neglected. One child is shown affection but another is overlooked. One child is complimented while another child is criticized. One child is disciplined while another is allowed to run wild. Each child has certain strengths of character. Each one excels in some area. And each child must receive unconditional love.

A parent should not state he or she loves a child because the child's behavior is good. Yet so often we hear, *"If you are not a good boy, Mother will not love you."* A child must have unconditional love. A parent should not love a child simply because the child makes the parent feel good by what he does. This is making a child responsible for an adult's happiness. A child dare not be neglected by his mother because he has some undesirable trait that her own husband may have or because the child reminds her of a relative whom she does not like. A child must be loved for his own sake. His own God-given personality should be developed impartially. This is what helps make parenthood such a creative opportunity, because each child is different.

4. Visit a prison and ask the prisoners how many of them grew up in a home where they felt that they were the black sheep of the family. You will be amazed at their answers. Some prisoners have this motto tattooed on their bodies: *"Born to lose."* In other words, their whole life has been a life of feeling inferior, unwanted, and worthless, often because of neglect or partiality in the home.

We learned that after the Korean War, 21 GI's went over to the enemy. They decided to surrender their American citizenship and defect to Communism. A study of these men and their backgrounds revealed that 19 of them had felt unloved and unwanted by their father or their stepfather at home. Nineteen of the 21 had come out of homes where they felt unloved and unwanted. Sixteen of these had withdrawn into themselves. Eighteen of the 21 took no part in any school activities or sports, and only one of the 21 was ever chosen by his classmates for anything. How revealing this study is. It shows us that there was a basic failure at home as far as all these young men were concerned. They were not given the

impartial and the unconditional love and encouragement that they needed from their parents. So family failure is a basic failure, and it shows itself in other areas of life.

Sin first came into the home. Sin first showed its ugly head at the home and family level—Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is at the home level that the Devil does his deadliest work. If he can defeat us at home, he has defeated us all along the line. If he can defeat our children at home, he will defeat them in every area of life. This is why we must be so careful of our reactions to our children at home. We must never be guilty of reacting toward one by giving one child conspicuous recognition and thereby downgrading the others. Jacob's reaction was wrong. Parental partiality is always wrong. That we must never forget.

One young lady in a Midwestern state told the story through her blinding tears how she was raised in a home of favoritism and partiality. She said, *"My sister was better looking than me. Her hair was prettier than mine. She looked better in every way and had more ability and more boyfriends. She had a more active social life. Everybody recognized her. Visitors would come to our home and remark about my sister, but I was neglected and forgotten."* Finally she said, *"I have done so many strange and awful things— just to get attention."* She added, *"I have tried everything. I have committed many sins just to get some kind of attention from boys and from other people."*

We say, "Well, what a tragedy!" Yes, but whose fault is this? We cannot blame the girl entirely. Her parents share the greater blame because of their favoritism and partiality. They did not teach this girl that she was important and that she was valuable to God, to them and to the world. They did not teach her to know that she had a contribution to make that her sister could never make.

Yes, Jacob was wrong in showing parental partiality. And we must be careful to see that our reaction is not as his was, or our children will suffer, and God's plan for them may be thwarted.

Consequences of Partiality

In the preceding section we saw from Genesis 37 that Jacob reacted to Joseph by giving him conspicuous, open partiality. We will now consider some of the consequences of that partiality. Jacob's sons reacted with hostility to his reaction to Joseph. This is understandable when we know human nature as the Bible shows it to be. Whenever someone is favored in a family, the other members of the family react—usually with opposition to the one favored. Joseph's brothers reacted against him with cruel rejection. It is vividly seen in the Biblical account:

"And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more" (Gen. 37:4,5). In verse 11 we learn that they envied him; and verse 18 tells us that they conspired against him to kill him.

The events followed each other rapidly. Jacob was partial to his son Joseph and loved him more than all his other sons. When the brothers saw this, they turned on Joseph with hatred and hostility. Then, to make matters worse, Joseph recounted a dream God had given him. He said to his brothers, in effect, *"I had a dream in which God showed me that someday I would rule over you, and that you would bow the knee to me."* Joseph may have

been unwise in relating this dream, but his motives were not wrong. He was not seeking to exalt himself. But his telling it only added to the hostility that was building up in the hearts of his brothers. This, remember, was in addition to the fact that his father had given him a coat that signified Jacob's special affection for him. No wonder they hated Joseph when they saw him wearing his special coat. But this was not all. He had also brought home a report of the evil actions of his older brothers. It is not hard to see why they built up resentment and hatred in their hearts toward him.

So their reaction was one of cruel rejection. Rejection is the natural reaction to partiality. The one favored becomes the one hated. Hostility springs from envy and jealousy. This shows the follow and the evil of parental favoritism. It provoked hatred in Jacob's family where there should have been love. And it was this hatred that made the brothers decide, *"We'll take care of him! "*

As the narrative progresses, we learn that Joseph was sent out to see his brothers as they were taking care of the sheep. They made him prisoner and were going to kill him, but they put him down into a pit instead. Ultimately they sold him as a slave to some traders who were going down to Egypt. No doubt, their thinking was something like this: *"It serves him right. He shouldn't have the coat anyway. We'll rip it off him. He's the boy that said he's going to be exalted above us. We'll show him. We'll put him beneath us. He's the one who told tales about us. We'll take care of him for good. We'll put a little common sense and reality into his head."*

Resentful and bitter, and like any of us guilty of wrongdoing, the brothers did not find it hard to justify their wicked reactions. They possibly said, *"We had reasons for the way we felt. If our father had not shown such favoritism, and if this boy had not been so foolish, we wouldn't have acted in that way. So it really wasn't our fault; it was their own fault. We had good reason for what we did."*

But we can never justify hatred We can never justify resentment There is no way in the world that we can justify bitterness and hostility. In the case of Joseph's brothers, these things almost ended in murder.

We always think that we have reasons for the way we react at times. There may even be other situations that contribute to our difficulty. But we can never justify wrong reaction before God. If I hate someone, that reaction is wrong regardless of how it has been provoked. If I have become resentful and bitter and unforgiving toward someone, I can never justify that attitude no matter what that person may have done to provoke me.

Many can relate to the following story as told by a well known evangelist of 50 years ago: I remember many years ago that a well-known man of God and I had a bitter disagreement. We disagreed on several matters, and he was as strong-willed about them as I was. He told me very frankly how he felt and what he thought about me. And I told him very frankly how I felt and what I thought about him.

We were both bitter. We were both resentful. We were both envious. And I went away thinking, *"Well, I have reasons for feeling this way. I can justify my reactions. After all, he started it. He's older than I am. He expressed hatred first. And I have good reasons—and if he hadn't done this and said this, then I wouldn't have reacted in this way."* Finally God got

me to the place where He could show me this. Then I had to go back to this man and say to him (the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life), *"I am wrong; my reactions are wrong. Regardless of what anyone else has said or done, my reactions have been wrong, and I cannot justify them."* Only then was I free. Only then did I have victory. To my great surprise this dear man turned to me and said, *"And my reactions were wrong, too. I am also guilty."* We became fast friends, because we were honest with each other. We did not seek to blame each other for our reactions, but we faced them honestly and took responsibility for them.

Joseph's brothers had a reaction of cruel rejection. Maybe we have had such a reaction. Maybe there has been hatred in our hearts toward someone else. This cannot be justified. Let us confess it to God and make it right with that other person. Then let us decide that regardless of how anyone else acts toward us, our reactions are going to be right in the sight of God. This whole story of Joseph is a series of reactions to reactions. So consider now Joseph's reaction to the rejection of his brothers. He reacted with creative resignation.

A person's real character is revealed by his reaction when he has been misunderstood, mistreated or hated. If we react in the same way others have reacted—with criticism and hostility, then we are no better than they are. And we are as guilty as they. We need to confess our sinful reactions to God just as much as they need to confess theirs. Our reactions can ruin us as much as their reactions can ruin them. If we react by becoming discouraged and fretful, and give in to feelings of inferiority and self-rejection, we are also being ruined. Any wrong reaction is ruinous and sinful.

If we react to critics in this way, we will never succeed, for there will always be critics. There will always be opposition. Often those who have accomplished the least in life are the first to criticize others. The Bible states very clearly, *"If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength [our faith] is small"* (Prov. 24:10). So a real test lies in how one reacts when there is difficulty. What we do when others reject us and ostracize us tells the story of what is taking place in our hearts.

Here is what the Bible says about Joseph: *"The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand"* (Gen. 39:2,3). Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brothers, but he did not become bitter. He did not throw in the towel and say, *"What's the use? God has left me. God has died."* No. Here was creative resignation. The Bible says God was with him. His attitude toward God was still right regardless of what other people had done. He was not controlled by his critics.

God often prepares us for responsibility by permitting opposition and some times even rejection. If we cannot stand the preparations for the job, how could we ever handle the job itself? If we cannot navigate in a rowboat on a small pond, how could we ever navigate in open, rough water on a large lake? What if Moses had gone home every time there was opposition? What if Daniel had turned back every time there was hostility? What if Paul had given up and rejected himself every time he was rejected? We must decide to take the adverse situation as from God. We must believe God will help us in it. This is creative resignation and a total surrender to God's providence.

Joseph didn't complain, *"Why did all this happen to me? Here I am—a slave in Egypt,*

deceived by my brothers. Why has God left me this way? Everyone is against me. I must be worthless. I'll have to resign to my fate, but I've learned from this never to trust people again. Even one's best friends can deceive him. If I could just get out of here and get back home!"

No such negative talk! He never whined; he never murmured. His attitude was victorious and positive and he may have thought: *"Here I am. I never dreamed I would be in such a predicament. But I am here, and it looks like I'll be here for a long time. This was not my choosing. God allowed this. God must have something in mind for me. I'll find out what it is. However long I must stay in Egypt, this experience will further my training and be a stepping-stone in my life. I will do my best and trust God for the outcome."*

What a man! A man like this cannot be hurt. Everything serves him. Everyone helps him. What is more, God blesses and prospers him. Some people always want to go back home. They want out of any new situation that presents problems and difficulties they do not understand. They want to get back to familiar ground. Actually they do not want change. They do not want the opportunities that every situation provides to bring about their maturity. They lack creative resignation to the will of God. But this was the quality Joseph had. This must be our reaction in every difficulty.

Joseph -- Tested and Exalted

Joseph's reaction to God's sovereignty and providential leadership enabled God to prosper him personally in his situation. It also enabled God to bless and prosper the entire house of Potiphar. This was because Joseph's relationship to God and to his difficulty was right. God prospered the Egyptian and all of his interests because Joseph had the right attitude. Joseph was God's channel of blessing in that situation. This is true today. Husbands and wives will find that their entire home can be blessed if they have the right relationship to God, the right attitude in their situation, and the right reaction to their difficulties. They can be the channel of blessing and prosperity to their entire home and family.

This does not mean that if a person is serving the Lord faithfully and honoring Him in his reactions, there will be no future problems. Joseph's experience is proof of this. A great temptation came to him right in the midst of his spiritual prosperity and service. According to Genesis 39:6 he was *"a goodly person and well favoured."* He was not only a handsome young man, he also had an attractive personality. In addition, he was a man of many talents and abilities. This drew Potiphar's wife's attention to him. She cast her eyes upon him and decided she would entice him to sin. It is no problem to entice someone who is all ready living on a low, shallow level. But here was a man of honesty and integrity; here was a man who had been unusually blessed of God.

Possibly she tried to overcome his scruples by suggesting, *"Surely you can have a little fun. Don't be so inflexible in your standards. No one will know about this. Stolen waters are sweet, Joseph, and bread eaten in secret places is pleasant."* Mark keenly the strong reaction of this young man Joseph. What a contrast to this day of so-called sexual freedom, this time of loose morals, this day of the so-called new morality. It was a reaction of courageous refusal. The Bible says in Genesis 39:8: *"But he refused."* How clear and simple and strong and definite that is.

1. Let us learn several important lessons right here about temptation and our meeting it.

Number one: temptation comes to all people—to any person in any land. Here was Joseph, a leader in Potiphar's house in charge of all of his possessions, and here was Potiphar's wife, also a person of prominence. But whether prominent or lowly, temptation comes to all. Wherever we are, whatever our position: husband or wife or child or pastor or missionary; whatever the place: in the home or business or church—temptation comes to all. It knows no strangers. Everyone who is alive is tempted. If we have a mind with which we think, there will be temptation through that mind. If we have a body in which we live, there will be temptation through that body. Everyone alive is tempted in this life and always will be. Temptation is our lifelong companion; therefore, temptation should never come as a surprise. Everyone is tempted, whatever his situation, whatever his station in life, whatever his relationship to God. Temptation comes to all. Settle this once and for all. (It would be wise to read I Cor. 10:11-15.)

The second is this: temptation comes during spiritual prosperity and often follows a great victory. Joseph had been serving the Lord and was busy and prosperous. The Bible says of him that God's hand was upon him and God's hand was upon the entire house

because of Joseph. Then, right in the midst of this prosperity, while he was enjoying the rich blessing of God, this violent temptation came.

We find this principle illustrated all through the Bible. There was Elijah's great victory at Mount Carmel. He stood for God in the face of all the opposition from the king and the false prophets of Baal. Right after this notable victory he gave way to despair and discouragement. He was driven into the wilderness by a threat from a woman. So, after a great victory on the mountain, there was a great temptation in the valley. The same was true after David had killed the giant Goliath. Everyone was singing David's praises, and this made Saul jealous. He wanted to kill David. Here again, right after a God-given victory, a great testing arose for David.

Daniel was exalted to the position of prime minister of Babylon. God honored and blessed him in every way, even giving him the confidence of the king. Then, right in the midst of this prosperity and success, he was falsely accused and thrown into the lions' den. After the victory came the testing.

In the case of our Lord Jesus Christ—when was His great testing? Right after He was filled with the Spirit; immediately after the Spirit of God anointed Him for His ministry. It was then that He was led into the wilderness to be tested of the Devil. The greatest testing followed the greatest victory.

Paul and Silas saw God working in a tremendous way through their ministry. But right in the midst of their spiritual success they were beaten, hauled off to prison and left to languish in the stocks. Spiritual prosperity was followed by serious problems. Mark this fact: The most dangerous times in our lives can be right after a thrilling spiritual victory.

Third, we must remember that temptation often comes from unexpected sources. The Devil uses anyone he can in any situation. Joseph minded his own business, and the very person he should have been able to trust was the one who tried to entice him.

The fourth thing to remember is that temptation is continuous. It is repeated. It is persistent. The Bible says Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph one day and he refused. Then she approached him another day, and finally it was a daily enticement. Daily she begged him. She did not let up. Yet daily he was firm in his refusal. So we must learn that victory over temptation one day does not mean there will be no temptations the next day. Every day we live we will face temptations of one kind or another, often the same kind. Temptation will be our lifelong companion. But every day Jesus Christ can enable us to have the right reaction to stand strong and to courageously refuse.

2. Consider more closely Joseph's reaction.

In the first place he was simple and firm in his answer. He said, *"No, I cannot do this."* He did not argue with her. He did not discuss the matter. There was no equivocation, no hesitancy. He did not say, *"Well, let's talk this over and let me try to convince you that this is not a wise thing to do at this time."* Very simply and courageously he refused and said, *"This is wrong."* His reaction was clear and strong on the side of righteousness.

In the second place, this passage in Genesis teaches us that he feared sin, not the temptation. So many of us Christians have a fatalistic dread of testing. We often think, If I weren't tested so often, life would be so much easier. But we must never fear trials. We should fear sin only. Testing is a wonderful blessing. It has many beneficial effects. Were it not for frequent testings our souls would become weak and lifeless. So we ought to thank God for testings and to fear only sin.

Joseph did not seek temptation nor make provision for it. But when temptation came in the line of duty and service, he was ready to face it. He considered every temptation a stepping-stone to victory. He considered every temptation an opportunity to defeat the Devil. Napoleon said, *"He who fears being conquered is sure of defeat."* So Joseph feared sin but not the trial.

In the third place, Joseph knew that sin was against God. So he said to this woman, *"How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"* (Gen. 39:9). He would have sinned against his own body. Every act of immorality is against our own body, the Bible says. (I Cor. 3:16-17; 6:15-20) He would also have sinned against this woman and against her husband and family. But Joseph knew that sin is primarily and essentially against God. So uncompromisingly he said, *"I cannot do this and sin against God."*

Fourth, He was determined to be victorious at any cost. Here was a young man who had decided: *"I don't care what happens to me. This woman may lie about me, she may accuse me, I may lose my position and my reputation and I may be confined to prison."* All these things happened. But he must have determined in his heart: *"I am going to maintain my integrity. I am not going to jeopardize my relationship to God. My reaction is going to be clear, strong, and without hesitation for what is right."*

3. Consider now Joseph's reaction to his erring brethren after he was made the prime minister of Egypt.

His brothers came down to Egypt to get corn because there was a famine in the land. They stood before Joseph but did not recognize him. What was his reaction to them? How did he respond in the light of all that they had done to him?

His reaction was one of godly retaliation. He could have thought, Now I am in a position to get even. I have my brothers just where I want them, and I am going to make them pay for their sins. I am going to let them know that the dreams I had about my being exalted above them were really true. This is the fulfillment. I am going to show these men that they cannot do what they did to me and get by with it. I am going to get my revenge.

No. Not one fleeting thought of this kind seemed to cross his mind. Instead, he said to them, *"God did send me before you to preserve life. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house"* (Gen. 45:5,8). Joseph assured them that he wanted them near him and urged them to move to Egypt. Forgiveness! This was his godly retaliation: forgiveness and love!

Joseph said that their deception was turned by God into good for him. His problems were his opportunities. His persecutors were unwittingly his friends. Everything that happened to him furthered God's plans and lifted and strengthened him. He was not hurt, for God brought good out of evil. God was in it all, so Joseph forgave them and wanted to love and help them.

Joseph counted no man his enemy. He made them his friends, because he had the right reactions. Is this how we react? Joseph was a genuine and mature believer. He experienced the truth of Romans 8:28 centuries before it was written: *"All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."* Joseph believed, as Jesus our Lord later said, that we are to love our enemies. We do not say that we have no enemies, but we are not their enemies. We will love them. This is the right reaction. This is gloriously possible as we allow the Lord to control us. Let us forgive and love when we are wronged; embrace these as opportunities for maturity, and God will prosper us increasingly.