



*Bruce Butler*

This week's devotions are based on an adult Bible study I led at Friends Church in Glendora, California. Using narratives from Genesis, we explored together some of the tricky issues involved with the very real families in the Bible's first book. Of course Genesis is about much more than family dynamics, but when carefully and properly observed I believe its truths can be useful as we deal with dysfunction in our own families. I've attempted to be transparent as to some of my own dysfunctions (I have more than I care to admit) and write with humility as a fellow sojourner with you toward greater relational health with others. Each day's closing thought suggests ways to bring these truths to bear in our church families.

I have lived and pastored in California since 1990, having moved with my young family from Barclay College in Haviiland, Kansas, to the busy and boisterous Los Angeles region. I enjoy hanging out with people, talking to my kids on the phone, and working at my mother's home in Alva, Oklahoma. I'm pictured with my mother, Barbara Hunt.

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 39:2-12*

I learned the most essential lessons in character formation amid my family relationships. Would I try to get away with lying, cheating, stealing, or violence for my own short-term ends, or would I learn that the long-term value of truthfulness, integrity, hard work, and peacemaking is best for me and everyone else? It's in our families that we learn the costs and rewards of living a life of integrity.

Though Joseph finds himself sold into slavery, the Lord is with him, prospering him as well as his master. Joseph's character grows through these troubling times. He recognizes the importance of his own personal integrity in the life of Potiphar's family. When approached by Potiphar's wife, Joseph's concern was based on doing right, knowing God was watching. Even though she put the pressure on, Joseph held firm. The cost of Joseph's integrity was high in the short term, but God's long-term rewards were worth it.

Your family needs you to act with individual integrity, no matter how others are acting and no matter how others react to your ethical decisions. Just as your whole family pays the consequences of unethical decisions by individual family members, so too your whole family will reap the rewards of your decisions to act rightly toward one another.

The same is true for our church families. We need to act with Christian integrity for the sake of the body of Christ, choosing to do right by others even though the short-term costs may be high.

*SONG: In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father, I confess my temptation to cut corners on personal integrity and ask for courage to do right by my family, no matter the cost. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 45:1-9*

I served as a hospice chaplain for nine years, working alongside dedicated nurses, doctors, social workers, and hospice aides to bring comfort and care to patients and their families during the final stage of living—the dying stage. A common experience observed by many hospice workers is that patients who have unreconciled family issues often struggle for peace at the end.

Sadly, some families live for years or even decades without forgiveness, unwilling to confess uncaring actions, painful words, or hurtful attitudes. Sometimes we find that harboring hurts keeps us in positions of power over our loved ones, fueling our refusal to reconcile.

Joseph's decision to reconcile with his brothers after having been sold into slavery did not come easily. First he had to assure himself his brothers had fundamentally changed (see Genesis 42—44) and that his youngest brother was still alive. His brother Judah's words and attitude of sorrow and care for their father Jacob sealed the deal. Joseph offered forgiveness and reconciliation to his brothers, basing his decision in God's magnificent purposes and sovereignty.

You wield a powerful weapon for good in your family—the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is costly, requiring you to release your right to retribution and repayment after others hurt you. Seeking to make things right with family members you've hurt frees them to risk coming close to you once again.

The same is true for our church families. When we learn to seek reconciliation with a brother or sister in Christ, we free ourselves to once again serve the Lord together with gladness.

*SONG: Open Up (The Brilliance)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, make me an instrument of your peace in the life of my family. Give me courage to forgive and reconcile. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 37:19-28*

As a small child I was delightfully unaware of tensions in our family. Only as I matured did I become conscious of some of the animosities, jealousies, and rivalries between extended family members.

Joseph had big dreams for himself. Unfortunately, those dreams came at the cost of the rest of his family (Genesis 37:5-11). Father Jacob favored Joseph with a coat of many colors, revealing unsound judgment about the effect on his family. Joseph's brothers seethed with jealousy. Driven by growing anger and Joseph's brazen lack of self-awareness, the brothers sold him into slavery. They broke the news to Jacob with a lie about Joseph's gruesome death, displaying the torn and bloody coat as evidence (Genesis 37:31-35). The brothers had their revenge. In the end every member of this family revealed a stunning deficiency of self-awareness leading to violent action and grief.

You can increase your family's harmony by working on your personal self-awareness. Look at yourself clearly in the mirror of the Scriptures. Own up to your failings by confessing your sins to God and others. Finally, determine to act with humility and servanthood.

Sometimes church families devolve into rivalry. Often this is based in an acute lack of self-awareness, particularly among leaders. But when we practice holy habits of Scripture study, prayer, confession, and humble service we become Christ-aware of others.

*SONG: Search Me, O God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord God, shine your penetrating and revealing light into my heart to reveal who I really am. Cleanse me of sinful attitudes that hurt my family. In Jesus name, amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 24:1-10*

Not long ago one of my adult sons was reviewing with me some of the ways we as his parents chose to instill values in our three children. With some chagrin my son wondered why we refused to let them watch a popular animated sitcom that all their friends got to watch on a regular basis. My answer was simple and unequivocal: our Christian values were at odds with the sitcom's values and we put God first.

Abraham was very concerned that his God-inspired values were passed along to his son Isaac. For God's covenant to endure to the next generation, Abraham couldn't choose a wife for Isaac among the Canaanites who didn't share his values, nor could he let Isaac move back home to family in northwest Mesopotamia, which would take him from the land promised in the covenant. Abraham deputized his chief servant to find a wife among extended family and bring her back to Isaac. This process was arduous, expensive, and included the possibility of failure, but passing along godly values to Isaac was worth the cost. Abraham put God first.

It's important as well for church families to pass along orthodox Christian values and practices to the next generations. Sometimes we are tempted to prioritize relationships over values when it comes to our spiritual offspring because we are afraid of "losing our children," anxious they will curtail their participation in church. But when we put God first and take our responsibilities before God seriously we can trust the Spirit with both our natural and spiritual children.

*SONG: Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus Christ, make me brave to maintain my Christian values. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 34:1-5, 24-31*

As a pastor I have witnessed far too often the devastating power of silence within families. There are serious topics that aren't discussed, such as Dad's alcoholism, Mom's angry outbursts, or Junior's entitlement. My own family experience tells me I am frequently more willing to live with painful dysfunction than pay the cost of speaking up about right and wrong.

Jacob's original character flaw of deception diminished as he aged, but he acquired a new character defect: silence. Knowing of Shechem's violation of Dinah, Jacob stayed silent. Jacob's sons learned the art of deception from their father. They tricked Shechem's men into being circumcised, lured by the false hope of acquiring Jacob's wealth. While the Shechemites were incapacitated from their wounds, Simeon and Levi killed them and rescued Dinah. All the sons then plundered the city and fields. Jacob finally broke his silence by chastising his sons' behavior, apparently more concerned about security, survival, and serenity with neighbors than doing right by his daughter.

Silence in the face of evil behavior is the breeding ground of further sinful dysfunction. Your family needs you to speak up about wrongs and offer leadership with godly responses. Our children and grandchildren need to learn how to confront sin with love and truth.

Church families can also suffer from the silence of leaders in the face of sinful attitudes and actions of members. When we speak truth with love, we free our churches from dysfunctional patterns that should not be tolerated.

*SONG: Fill Me Now*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, fill me with your Spirit that I may walk circumspectly, worshipfully, and thankfully in these trying times. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 29:21-25, 30-32; 30:1-2, 22-23*

One night in sixth grade I realized my father had not come home. My parents had separated. I cried softly in bed and longed for my family to be made whole, for my father's alcoholism to be healed, and for us to be happy as a family.

Our family members have legitimate expectations of what family should be and do. We expect to be loved and to sacrifice for one another. We expect commitment, nurture, and safety from our parents, obedience and respect from our children, and fidelity and security from our spouses.

Today's Bible reading from Genesis 29—30 pulls us into the pain that members of one family experienced because of legitimate, unfulfilled longing and expectation. Jacob longed for Rachel to be his wife, but after seven years of labor he was misled into marrying her sister Leah. Only after another seven years did Jacob finally marry Rachel. Leah longed to be loved by Jacob, who loved Rachel more than Leah. Rachel longed to have children but was barren. Their pain was palpable. Amazingly, God's ultimate purposes brought fulfillment to each one.

You may be able to relate to the pain of unfulfilled expectations, having lived through divorce, addiction, abandonment, loneliness, insecurity, or infidelity. You can be assured God knows of your pain and your longing for wholeness.

Church families can also suffer from unfulfilled expectations through members' selfish ambition and self-interest (Philippians 2:3-4). Let's learn to carry each other's burdens and fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

*SONG: Make Me a Blessing*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, I lay my expectations at your feet and look for fulfillment in you. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Genesis 25:27-28; 27:1-10*

I was raised in a family where I wasn't made to feel second best compared to siblings or cousins. From parents to aunts and uncles to Grandma, they all loved this redheaded rascal as much as my beautiful older sister or adorable younger brother. In spite of other dysfunctions, my family had wisdom enough not to play favorites.

We are all unique in our individual talents and temperaments. Wise parents understand that each child needs to be reared with this in mind. Wise parents also understand the importance of judicious, evenhanded treatment.

Brothers Esau and Jacob found themselves caught in the bind of their parents' uneven love. Isaac looked forward to giving firstborn Esau his blessing. Rebekah was determined the blessing should go to Jacob, the child of promise as she understood it (25:23). Genesis 27 describes plotting, pain, and dashed promises caused by parents unwisely playing favorites. God used this painful episode to further his covenant purposes, but it was in spite of, not because of, Isaac and Rebekah's foolish favoritism.

As an influencer, you are called to be wise as you raise up kids in the way they should go. Those we influence are equally unique and deserve evenhanded love and support as they grow into godly servants.

Church families can foolishly play favorites by giving preference to insiders, old-timers, or big givers at the expense of those young in faith, new in leadership, or less materially blessed, resulting in unnecessary and long-lasting pain.

*SONG: Jesus Loves the Little Children*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, increase my love beyond my natural inclinations and affinities. Amen.*

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