

Favoritism

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There is an interesting sequence of events that occurred in the Old Testament, spanning over several generations, and dealing with the central theme of favoritism. It shows people choosing favorites in families, and the terrible consequences that result. How do we react to being or not being the favorite? What impact does this have with our relationship to God?

Remember Isaac and his wife Rebekah were barren and prayed for a child. God blessed them Esau and Jacob. Each parent then picked a favorite; Isaac chose Esau, and Rebekah chose Jacob. After Rebekah helped Jacob deceive Isaac for the blessing, Jacob left to escape the impending wrath of his brother Esau. Jacob didn't learn much, though, for he in turn chose a favorite between his two wives. The favoritism war escalated, as the two wives competed with each other to see who could bear the most sons.

Joseph left to return home, and when he got close to his brother Esau, his favorite wife Rachel was protected to the utmost. But she died as she brought her second son, Benjamin, into the world. Imagine the sorrow of Jacob as his favorite was now gone. Leah might have thought that she would finally get the attention that she needed, but Jacob held the two sons of Rachel as his favorites in her stead. Jacob favored especially Joseph, who enjoyed this role. But his brothers hated him for it and sold him into slavery. Jacob's favoritism caused the ruin most of rest of his life as he grieved for his lost son Joseph.

As we know, Joseph was eventually made second in command of all Egypt, and was put in charge of the grain collection and storage for the coming famine. Joseph's other brothers, who had lived for twenty years with the knowledge of what they had done, finally had to go to Egypt to buy grain. But they went without Benjamin, for Jacob was afraid of losing the last of Rachel's sons. It is interesting to see how the brothers treated this new favorite.

Joseph had spent twenty years wondering perhaps if his brothers had changed. When Joseph saw his brothers he tested them to see if they would treat Benjamin the same way that he had been treated. He first gave them a taste of their own medicine by putting them in prison for three days. In front of Joseph they mourned in their own language the fact that they ever sold their brother. He saw then that they were sorry, and that they had changed. But he made them bring Benjamin up to Egypt, in spite of Jacob's fears, to test them. Jacob only allowed it after Judah stepped forward to offer his own self for condemnation.

When the brothers returned, Joseph invited them to eat a meal with him, and gave Benjamin five times the portion of the other brothers in a great show of favoritism. Imagine the brother's thoughts: even this foreigner favored Benjamin above us! Joseph gave them the real test as they left him. He put his silver cup in Benjamin's sack, and then sent his armed men to arrest whoever had the cup. Naturally, the brothers denied taking the cup and were mortified when it was found in Benjamin's sack. The brothers rent their clothes in their horror, as they returned to Joseph to be judged. Joseph then put the pressure on: they could all leave but Benjamin. Here the brothers had a chance to get rid of the current favored one, just as they had gotten rid of Joseph. This was the magic moment. And then Judah stepped into the breach.

Judah explained the favoritism of Benjamin in some detail. He mentioned that their father believed that the other son of the favored wife had been torn to pieces. Then Judah offered himself up in Benjamin's place as he had promised his father. Judah was in every way showing that he was different, that he had learned his lesson: that living all his life with someone else as the favorite was not that bad. We assume that the brothers were in basic agreement with him.

Then Joseph broke down emotionally as he saw that his brothers had indeed changed. He saw that they would not do to Benjamin what they had done to him, and he begins to weep. Imagine how the brothers felt as Joseph revealed himself to them. But Joseph had no thought of revenge, and he made a place for his whole family in the land of Egypt.

One important lesson here is that history does not have to repeat itself. No matter how bad you have been, you can change, you can become better! The second lesson is that we do not have to be the favorite in everyone's eyes. Do we react poorly when we are not chosen, when we are not the favorite? Are we the last to be chosen for the team? We must remember the words of Christ: "the last shall be first". Through Christ God treats us all as his favorites.

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