

Why Your Family Still Controls You

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning, everybody. My name is Anthony, and I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the table. And we have been doing a summer-long series called What Lies Beneath?

! Moving from the clouded to the clear as disciples of Jesus. And over the weeks, we've been using the iceberg analogy about the 10% of our lives, which is above the surface of the waters, and the 90% of our lives, which is underneath the surface.

And we spent a few weeks talking about Moses and the burning bush, and the art of paying attention, and of pausing and of hearing God's voice. And last week, Daniel, one of our elders, talked about discernment and how we figure out God's will.

And a few weeks ago, I talked about how figuring out God's will is one of the most common, popular questions that I get as a pastor. Now, I'm going to be preaching the next three weeks.

So buckle up, because we're going to be talking about a couple of my favorite topics, and I'm very excited about them. These, this week and next week, is sort of a part one, part two. So when we get to the end of today's sermon, it's not going to feel like it has much of a conclusion.

[1 : 09] That's on purpose. So you come back next week, or tune in next week, or download the podcast next week, whatever works for you. And my favorite, some of my favorite topics as a pastor have to do with where spirituality and psychology intersect.

Now, I've been trained in a couple different disciplines. I am not a licensed therapist. Do not come and see me for therapy. I have lots of people I can refer you out to. That said, as somebody that historically pastors were known as sort of doctors of the soul, I have made it my business to do as much education as I can about some of the things that work in our brains and our families and all of this.

So two of my favorite things to talk about are family systems and trauma, or trauma competency.

Family systems and trauma. So we're going to spend these two weeks talking about Joseph and his family in the book of Genesis, looking at that through the family systems lens.

And then on week three, we're going to be looking at a really tough story in Scripture and looking at that through the lens of trauma. And we'll give some content warnings in a couple weeks when that shows up.

Now, the reason that we want to talk about this, when Tanetta was planning her sabbatical for the summer, she was asking me, she's like, hey, you're going to be doing a majority of the preaching. What are some things that are coming up for you or coming up in your prayer life as you think about what the congregation needs to hear?

[2 : 35] And obviously, we're in this tough crisis moment as a democracy, as a country. And we get to be at the white hot center of that, living in the D.C. area.

Of what is our nation's values going to be around inclusion and immigration and LGBTQ rights and how we deal with poverty and how we deal with race.

We are dealing with what kind of democracy are we going to be. Are we going to be a failed one? Are we going to be a revitalized one? And so that has all of its effects in our lives and the lives of our family and our partners and our neighbors.

Will we have a job? Will we have to move away? Will we have somebody that we love or have that person ourselves be discriminated against in some really tough way?

So there's all of that anxiety. And there's also the internal anxieties of friendships that fall apart or familial, family relationships that have growing tension and distance.

[3 : 42] And then there's the stuff that actually happens in the church because I know this is hard for some of you to believe, but some of you don't get along. Did you know that? And I get to hear

about it.

And so I get to have meetings about, hey, did you hear about what so-and-so did? And what are you going to do about this person? And what's the church's policy on church discipline?

And what can you do about these interpersonal relationships? So as me and Pastor Tanetta were talking about planning out the sermon series for the summer, that's what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to talk about the systems, the interwoven connections, and how anxiety gets passed around from person to person.

People talk, and they come to me or Heidi or Tanetta or a director and an elder, and they're going to say something like, you know, I don't want to make this about myself. I don't want to talk about myself, but I'm worried about so-and-so, right?

Maybe you've been in that prayer circle or the WhatsApp chain. Did you hear about, let's pray about so-and-so and what they're up to. And so then these anxieties, they infect relationships like a virus.

[4 : 55] In 2020, we all got to become amateur epidemiologists, right? Exploring, you know, R0 patterns of viruses and things like that.

And that was for, you know, an actual sickness that killed people. But anxiety, and I'll define anxiety in a little bit, has its own virus-like properties. It spreads. It contaminates.

It's contagious. Now, I grew up the youngest of six siblings, and we sort of paired off. I had an oldest brother and sister.

They went off to college. A middle brother and sister. They went off to college. And then who was left was me and my closest brother, David, which if you've heard me preach and talk, you know that my brother David passed away, was killed in a car accident back in 2018.

And we were very, very close. We were both homeschooled together through, like, 6th and 7th grade on, through high school. And so we were like each other's, like, everything.

[5 : 53] We had to, we were a very, very tight unit. We did youth group together and 4-H together and all these things. And then his junior year of high school, mom and dad discovered an M&M; CD in his truck.

And this was the straw that broke the camel's back where they made him throw out all of his CDs and all of his stuff. And that's when he decided to move out. Okay?

Now, this is a sort of gross generalization, but it tends to be true that in family systems, there are internalizers and externalizers. That when there is stress or anxiety hitting a person, somebody can externalize.

And so they're reacting more impulsively. They have strong needs to, you know, let their feelings out. They need immediate resolution of conflict. And then there are internalizers. They withdraw. They have difficulty expressing emotion. They avoid conflict. My brother was the externalizer. He got in trouble. He got caught having an M&M; CD in his car. And so he raged and threw a fit and moved out his junior year of high school.

[6 : 53] And so my rebellious brother was out of the picture. And all that was left in the household now was me. And I was an internalizer. I was quiet. I was well-behaved.

I was the straight-A student. And now all of my parents' anxieties about their rebellious child got to shift focus to the one kid left in the household, me.

And my reaction to that was to just be that much more perfectionist. To make myself really small socially. And then over time, really big professionally.

Hello from the pulpit. Okay? I feel most comfortable when I'm in charge and the center of attention. But I feel least comfortable if I just have to, like, mill about a room.

Okay? And this is how me as an internalizer functions is that I did everything I could to get my parents' attention off of me. And also everything I could in order to be in charge of a situation and to prove that I was worthy of affection and love.

[7 : 59] Now, my family, super conservative, politically, spiritually, religiously. And as I went through undergrad, I became the opposite of that.

Okay? And so my first sort of rebellion against family belief system was believing that God used evolution to create the world. And the world was not created in six days.

This created rift, anger, and argument between me and my family. And there was something about that that felt really liberating. Oh, I could argue with my family?

And so then my views drifted further and further and further apart from my family. And to this day, this question haunts me. What if my beliefs and my actions are just sort of like a rubber band snap

against my family and their anxiety?

Now, I think I have good reasons to believe the things that I believe. But also, there's sort of that fear of had all of that pressure put on me as a kid. And now what can I do? As that rubber band grows tighter and tighter and tighter and finally releases, it flies the other direction.

[9 : 05] What can I do to fly the other direction for my family? Now, this is just a small example of the way that anxiety or stress in a family sort of flows through like leaky pipes.

Where my brother was called this rebellious one. And so all of my parents' angst got put onto him. He leaves the system, sort of opts himself out. So all of that gets put on me.

And I take that and I use that to become a perfectionist. And then I use that to get really big professionally. And I use that to move further away from my family, both geographically and theologically and politically.

And you can see the way that these anxieties have these unintended consequences. So I want to use that sort of idea as a lens to read a chunk of scripture.

Now, when we're going to read through Genesis, some sections of Genesis and the story of Joseph, what I'm not going to be saying today is that this was the author's intent, was to give you a theology of family systems theory.

[10 : 02] That's not what I'm saying. That was not the framework that they had back in 1000 BC or whatever. What we're doing is I'm intentionally taking a modern psychological lens or sociological lens and applying it to a set of biblical stories to see what we can learn from it.

Do you hear the difference? Okay. Okay. So family systems 101, how anxiety spreads. Let me teach you some basic dynamics of family systems. First, sort of basic assumption is the idea of emotional interdependence.

Families function as emotional units where everyone affects everyone else. Okay? That's basic assumption number one. So if you have a worldview that says, I am an island, nobody's emotions affect me, that's impossible, and I don't affect anyone else, you're not going to, family systems is not going to make any sense to you.

Basic assumption is that emotions all affect one another. Okay? Basic assumption number two is anxiety transmission. So anxiety, a definition, is just a natural emotional tension or stress in response to change.

So some of you, here I am, one of them on this platform, may have been diagnosed with anxiety, and you immediately associate that with something very negative. Not necessarily the way I'm using it this morning.

[11 : 19] It's a natural emotional tension or stress in response to change. And that anxiety is infectious. It can move around. It can affect family members.

So interdependence, anxiety transmission. And then another sort of assumption is that in a family system, you can have anxiety givers and anxiety takers.

Okay? So some people in the family, the way that they're going to deal with anxiety coming into the system, finances are bad, a job looks uncertain, a kid is acting up, my marriage is on the rocks.

The way that their natural tendency to deal with that is going to be like, oh, I have this burning hot anxiety. Let me toss it to someone else. Okay? And so that's one way that it can become infectious and spread.

A second way is that someone is watching all of this anxiety. Oh, mom and dad's job situation looks bad. Oh, my brother or sister is acting up. Oh, my coworker in this, like, set of office relationships is, like, really not doing their job.

[12 : 23] And so their response is to take the anxiety. Let me take that for you. Let me just take that on. I'll take it. I'll make it right. I'll fix it. Okay? So those are two basic kind of relationships.

People who are tossing the hot potato, people who just want to get all the hot potatoes they can because they feel like that's how they are going to stay belonging in the system. Are you with me so far?

Okay? I will warn you, this sermon is going to be very sort of theory heavy. And then next week is going to be much more application heavy. So stay with me. Now, you can have two responses to trauma or anxiety.

And that it can be to make yourself really small. So how do I get myself as tiny as I can? And I'm not necessarily speaking physically, even though that can be a real effect as well.

How can I get myself as small as I can? I will take up less space. I will speak up less. I will cause less conflict. I will just get myself as small as I can so that I don't have to be the object or the focus of the anxiety, the stress, or the trauma.

[13:27] Or it can be making yourself really big. Okay? I have been hurt. I will do whatever I can to make sure that I will never be hurt again. And if anyone's going to hurt anybody, I will do the hurting.

So making yourself really small can be avoiding conflict. It can be intense people-pleasing. Or it can just be emotional cutoff. Hey, the best way for me to be invisible in your life is that if I just never talk to you again.

Or to make yourself really big can be to build an empire, to gain control, to do lots of power over and power up dynamics. And paradoxically is that sometimes the same person can do both depending on the situation or the context.

They give back to their family. It's Thanksgiving and they're small. They're tiny. They don't make a sound. And then they get back to the office and they are a jackass. Right? You know some of these people.

Yeah. So some key concepts that we're going to see in Joseph's story is some triangulation. So this is a core principle in family systems theory.

[14:30] And if you want to Google or look this up, you can look up Bowen at family systems theory. The triangle is the basic unit of the family system. It's the basic molecule. It's that two people, whenever anxiety gets into the system, they pull in a third.

Okay? And they create a relationship or an emotional triangle in an attempt to find stability. So they stabilize, but they often solve nothing. We'll also see a pattern of multi-generational transmission, the way that anxiety and dysfunction is passed down through generations.

We'll see the family projection process, which is sort of a specific way that parents transmit their emotional problems down to their children.

And then we're going to see differentiation versus reactivity. So the difference between a healthy response and that rubber band rebellion. All right.

With that, let's actually get into some scripture. So if you have a Bible or a device, I invite you to turn to the book of Genesis. And we will land in Genesis 37.

[15:40] I'm going to give a little bit of context before we get there, but we're going to land in Genesis chapter 37. And the first thing I want to explore is just the tracing the transmission of stress and anxiety from Abraham down to Joseph.

So really quick review of the Genesis story. Genesis 1 through 11 gets you through creation. I'll start over here for your perspective. Creation to the Tower of Babel.

And you have this sort of huge mythological, cosmological, primeval history from the beginning of the universe to the creation of language in Genesis 11.

That creates a unit. And then you have a new unit in the book of Genesis, Genesis 12, which starts the Abram or Abraham story. And so there's this narrowing in of focus from the beginning of the world to the beginning of the people of God, Israel, centered in the person of Abraham.

With Abraham, then you have what are called the patriarchs, these sort of founding fathers and mothers of Israel, of the Jewish story, that begins with Abraham and then continues to narrow down in focus from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, who gets renamed as Israel, to Jacob's sons, the 12 tribes of Israel.

[17:01] Then you turn the book over to Exodus and you get the Exodus story. Okay? So in this story, you have a variety of ways that you see that the founding fathers and mothers of Israel are highly dysfunctional.

The Genesis story makes very, very little effort, if any at all, to make these people seem flawless or perfect. If anything, you are seeing their imperfections shining for the world to see.

So Abram gets called out of a city called Ur to move into Canaan with his wife Sarah. And a variety of times, Abram lies about the identity of his wife, calling her his sister, because he is anxious about her being sexually assaulted by the rulers of the land.

Abram is told by God that he is going to be the progenitor of nations and of a people that God is going to use to bless the world.

And so Abram, not having kids, takes things into his own hands and takes his wife's maidservant, Hagar, and has Ishmael, a child, not the child of promise that God had given him.

[18 : 15] And then when Sarah calls him out on this, he just kicks Hagar and Ishmael out. Abram, you know, has to sacrifice or attempt to sacrifice Isaac to prove his faithfulness to God.

Of course, God provides a ram. Isaac is not sacrifice. And then there's this interesting thing that the rabbis notice in Genesis, that after the not sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham and God never speak again in the narrative.

Abraham then takes Isaac's marriage into his own hands and gives very specific instructions to his servant to manage who Isaac is going to marry. Then we get to Isaac.

Isaac has children. He repeats his father's exact deception about Rebekah, pretending that Rebekah is not his wife but a sister, so that she is not taken from him.

Isaac allows there to be enmity between Jacob and Esau, and they become enemies. And another thing to notice is that Isaac chooses favorites.

[19 : 24] He chooses Esau as his favorite. Jacob is the deceiver and tries to usurp that away from Esau. Just like Abraham, his father kicked out Ishmael and Isaac became the son of promise.

Then it gets passed down to Jacob. Jacob uses his mom to triangulate between his dad and Esau and get between the two of them. Jacob uses third parties to avoid conflict with his brother.

He uses his father-in-law's two daughters, his wives, to plot against his father-in-law, their dad. And then also Jacob has a favorite wife, Rachel, while Leah is left unloved.

Anna has favorites among his children, which we're going to soon see. So in every single generation, you have this favoritism chain. Each generation creates insiders and outsiders who is loved and who is sometimes literally kicked out to the desert.

So now, Genesis 37, verse 3. Now Israel, this is the new name for Jacob. Israel means to wrestle with God. El, by the way, is that ending in Hebrew that means God.

[20 : 37] So whenever you see an El name, that represents God. So Israel loved Joseph more than any of his children because he was the son of his old age.

And he made him an... We're going to pause here for a second. Those of you who have Bibles open, what does it say? What did Israel make Joseph? Ornate robe.

Anybody say multicolor robe? Many colors. Anybody say technicolor dream coat? Okay. Again, something that the rabbis noticed about this story is that there are many things about Joseph which are...

They didn't use this language, but genderqueer. Okay? That there are lots of things about Joseph's story that seem to go against what was expected of the gender expectations of the day.

And there's actually a whole other thing that we can't get into today about the possibility of there being a gender swap in the womb that the rabbis discussed. But the other thing that they noticed, which is actually in the text, is that this phrase, an ornamented robe, is used one other time in 2 Samuel to describe the particular wear that the daughters of the king, the princesses, would wear.

[21 : 49] Okay? So some rabbis translate this as a princess dress. Okay? So Joseph is the favorite and is gifted some sort of, like, doesn't quite fit in with the male expectation dress or wear.

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all of his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. Now, here already, with like about, you know, 10 minutes worth of family systems theory, you can see some stuff going on here, right?

Okay? The father loves the brothers hated. See that rubber band snap effect? The anxiety being passed. Israel loves Joseph more because he's the son of his old age.

Jacob seems to be focusing on Joseph out of his own unresolved anxiety. And Jacob has lots of reasons. Jacob, Israel, same person, has lots of reasons to have anxieties.

His wife died giving birth to Benjamin, so his beloved wife is gone. Joseph is Rachel's firstborn, so he gets to carry all of Jacob's grief and guilt about Rachel.

[22 : 57] Jacob is getting up in years, so this becomes his son of old age. Jacob has his own history of being the special second son who displaced the firstborn. Jacob becomes the special one who then needs attention.

And after Joseph has his dream, which we'll talk about, Jacob then has some options as a parent. So there's this family projection going on where Jacob scans the scene and picks out one of his kids, because there's the 12 sons and there's also some daughters, and he picks out a kid to focus out his fear and anxiety.

He diagnoses the child's behavior. Oh, this one is special. My anxieties have been put on him, and so now I believe that this one is special. So, verse 5, Genesis 37, verse 5.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. Which, you know, to be fair, who loves it when somebody tells you a dream? So verse 6, he said to them, listen to this dream that I dreamed.

There's like, there's a, this American Life episode where Ira Glass's mom says like the two or three things that you should never talk about in conversation. One is your route. How were the roads? [24:06] How did you get here? Nobody wants to talk about that. Two is your personal dreams. They are interesting to only you, okay? He said to them, listen to this dream I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field.

Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright. Then your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf. And his brothers said to Joseph, are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us? So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. Verse 9, he had another dream and told it to his brothers saying, look, I had another dream.

Get the clue, Joseph, come on. The sun, the moon, and the eleven stars were bowing down to me. But when he told it to his father and his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, what kind of dream is this that you have had?

Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow down to the ground before you? So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

[25:07] So the normal parent response would have been, Joseph, this is inappropriate. Dreams are private. This kind of talk creates division in the family. But Jacob's response is more of anxiety management.

His father rebukes him publicly. But, keeps the matter in mind privately. He scolds Joseph to manage the family tension, but privately he's filing this away.

And if we take this sort of family systems lens, we can read it as sort of confirmation that Joseph really is special. Yeah, I do have his right to give him that princess dress. That dress of royalty.

The dreams aren't arrogance, they're prophecy. This confirms Jacob's belief that Joseph is marked for greatness. And so then the projection moves into step three, treating.

The parent treats the child as if there's something really is wrong or something really right or is special about the child. And that coat of many colors, that royal dress, makes the anxiety visible to everyone.

[26:10] This is my special boy. Treat him special. And it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And it creates the perfect storm for sibling rivalry. So then you get this triangulation disaster.

Where Jacob and Joseph are the comfortable, close insiders. And remember the family transmission of there's always insiders and outsiders. Abraham and Isaac, not Ishmael.

Abraham and Sarah, not Hagar. There's Isaac and Esau, not Jacob. There's Jacob and Rachel, not Leah. Jacob and Joseph, not the sons and daughters.

And the brothers become the uncomfortable outsiders. And so the anxiety spread. I'm going to give Joseph the special coat. Joseph feels special and he's going to tell his stupid dreams to his brothers.

And the anxiety and the hatred grow. And the brothers' hatred grows in direct proportion to Joseph's favored status. So Genesis 37, verse 18.

[27:12] They saw him from a distance. And before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. And they said to one another, here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.

I want to pause for a second and talk about why I like family systems theory. I appreciate this lens because the focus is not on just the individual and personal responsibility.

It's about a system of dysfunction that's been building usually for generations. And if not for generations, then at least has to do with more than just one single person making bad decisions. And so there's a sort of redemptive way that we can be looking at this. The brothers aren't just evil. That can be sort of the Sunday school way of looking at this, these scheming brothers who are going to kill Joseph.

They're actually trapped. They're trapped in a family system that has made them perpetual outsiders. And so they've seen the way that their dad treated Esau.

[28:19] They've seen the way that Abraham, heard the stories about how Abraham treated Ishmael. They've seen all of these ways that their family has had insiders and outsiders. And so

from their perspective, there's only one way to get in good with their dad again.

And as crazy as it seems, it's murder. If we can just get Joseph out of the picture, then we can be the favorite sons again. They're trapped in the system. When I get to hear other people's stories through this lens, when someone comes to me and says, have you heard about what so-and-so is doing?

I tend to have much more empathy and grace for them when I look at them through this sort of lens. Rarely are people making decisions solely because they want to be evil or bad or selfish.

They're making decisions that make sense to them, considering what their own emotional triangles and generations of family systems have taught them. When someone has been raised in a high-control family or a high-control religious system, it makes sense that when they get out of that, they want to be in complete control of their lives and take high amounts of risks.

When someone has been horribly wounded by abuse, it makes sense that every human interaction to them is going to look like a potential threat. And when people are arguing or fighting or in conflict, it makes sense that they're going to want to bring in a third party to get them on their side and do the heavy lifting of conflict for them.

[29 : 51] Because every conflict looks like the potential for disaster. So, knowing this, when I hear Jesus say challenging words like, love your enemies, I know that God knows the enemy's family system.

What made the enemy the enemy? What made the enemy feel like they had no choice but to use whatever agency or power they had to wound and to harm? And might God be inviting me to take a similar lens with my enemy to be able to have grace and compassion and empathy for their actions that I know are harming me or harming my neighbor but are actually coming from their own woundedness.

So, Joseph, of course, is traumatized. He's not killed, but he's sold into slavery. And he has to have his own response. He is coming into his own as an adult.

And so, he becomes the empire builder. He takes on the really big response to trauma. Now, we don't have time to do all of the nitty-gritty of Joseph's story, but very quickly, he's sold into slavery. Joseph ends up in prison and is eventually released because he interprets Pharaoh's dreams. So, this is Genesis 41. Flipping ahead a couple pages. Genesis 41, verse 39.

[31 : 15] Pharaoh said to Joseph, Since God has shown you all this, and this prophecy has to do about an oncoming famine that Egypt can prepare for, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.

So, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, says to Joseph, You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand, He arrayed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.

I mean, Joseph is blinged out. He's got the princess dress. He's got the fine linen. And he had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried out in front of him, Bow the knee!

And thus, Pharaoh set Joseph over all the land of Egypt. And so he rises to become second-in-command from the pit to Pharaoh's right-hand man.

[32 : 17] And eventually controls the economy of the entire Middle East down into Northern Africa. And so this is the classic trauma response that we talked about.

I will never be powerless again. You throw me in a pit, I will become the pit master. This is not a barbecue reference.

You hate me for the clothes that my father gives me. I will be clothed in the clothing of royalty.

So then, chapter 42, verse 6. Now Joseph was governor over the land, and it was he who sold to all the people of the land.

And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them.

[33 : 15] So the famine's happening, Joseph's in charge, and in this sort of play that the author of Genesis is giving to us, the brothers now have had the tables turned on them.

They must now go to Joseph and beg for food so that they can survive. They don't recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognizes them. Verse 23. They did not know that Joseph understood them

since he spoke with them through an interpreter, and he turned away from them and wept, and then he returned and spoke to them.

Now I grew up, I was taught a way of looking at the Bible that sort of forced to see every single one of the patriarchs as heroes. And so Sunday school teachers and Bible teachers, they had to sort of like twist themselves into pretzels to get the Bible to be able to say, well, so yes, Joseph's being deceptive, but this is actually good because of this, this, and the other thing.

And this never really made sense to me, but I bought it for a while. But what if we look at these stories of, you don't have to look at Joseph as a hero.

You see Joseph simply reenacting all of the things that his generations of family has taught them. What if Joseph isn't a hero, but he's petty and vindictive?

[34 : 30] Joseph has the power to resolve this situation immediately, but he doesn't. And if you keep reading, he creates these elaborate tests and manipulations, he's framing them for theft.

He's simultaneously emotionally connected, you see him weeping, and emotionally distant. He uses an interpreter, a third party, to do the communication. So in some versions of this story, this is like a, you know, a forgiveness story.

Oh, look at how wonderful Joseph is to forgive them. But to me, this looks like somebody who gained power and control and doesn't want to give it up. Now notice what happens.

We're going to skip ahead a couple chapters to Genesis 47. It says this, Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe, and the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt, in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought. And Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, Give us food!

[35 : 41] Why should we die before your eyes? Our money's gone. And Joseph answered, Well, now give me your livestock, and I'll give you food in exchange for your livestock if your money's gone. So they brought livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for horses, flocks, herds, donkeys.

When that year was ended, they came to him the following year and said, We cannot hide that all of our money is spent, and the herds of the cattle are now my Lord's. You, there's nothing left in the sight of my Lord but our very bodies and our lands.

Shall we die before you? Your eyes, both we and our land, buy us and our land in exchange for food. We, with our land, will become slaves to Pharaoh. Just give us seeds so we may live and not die.

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields because the famine was severe, and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.

They said, You have saved our lives. May it please the Lord. We will be slaves to Pharaoh. Now, again, there's a way of reading the story that's like, Wow, God was so faithful to Joseph.

[36 : 49] He brought him up from the pit and from slavery and out of the prison, and made him second in charge. This is what it's like to be faithful to God. God will reward you. No. Joseph is creating the very systems that will be turned around and used against his people in not so many years' time.

He creates the very system of oppression that his family will later suffer under. Joseph's trauma response to being powerless leads him to create the systems of domination, the very patterns that will oppress his own descendants in Egypt.

You throw me in a pit, I will never be powerless again. So, in preparation for the sermon, I've been thinking about my own rubber band reactions.

And there's one particular way I can look at them. It is God's spirit moving me into who God wants me to be. And there's the part of me that's anxious, that I'm just snapping back against my own parents' anxiety.

But the thing I notice about myself is I can give a whole sermon about family systems theory, I can analyze triangulation patterns in scripture, I can spot anxiety transmission from a mile away, and when my own parents call, when I'm sitting around their dinner table, I still feel like I'm 19 years old.

[38 : 20] Trying to prove I'm smart enough, trying to show them I turned out okay, trying to justify my choices. And that's when I realize that I am still being reactive. I'm still letting their anxiety about

who I became control how I show up in the relationship.

I'm trying to make myself really big professionally. Look at me. I'm a pastor, I've got degrees, I can preach about family systems theory, but I can still be really small emotionally.

Still just can't be myself around them or around strangers without needing someone to think that I'm special, to approve of me.

And the healing happens slowly. It's like learning to walk and talk. To learn to be just myself instead of my achievements.

Learning to disagree without needing to win. Learning to love without needing to be understood.

And it's mostly learning to ask the question, Anthony, are you responding or are you reacting right now?

[39 : 34] And when the answer is reacting, which it often is, it's giving myself that permission to pause and to breathe and to choose something different. Because that's what we're all trying to figure out. How to be ourselves without needing everyone else to change first or to everyone else to be a vote on a committee about who we are.

And ultimately, God does have a vision of who we actually are. Spiritual transformation, discipleship, formation, however you want to say it, is not about becoming something that you're not.

It's about shedding all of the ways that our woundedness and the toxic systems of this world have put on all of these coats that shouldn't have been ours to begin with.

shedding those so that we can be who God originally created us to be. Jacob spent his whole life trying not to be Isaac. Joseph spent his time trying not to be powerless.

The brothers spent their energy trying to get what Joseph had. But here's what none of them seem to ask. What would it look like to actually be myself instead of just reacting to everyone else?

[40 : 47] So the question I want to leave us with today, we'll get back into this next week, is not how do I fix my family, not how do I get them to change, but how do I stop letting other people's anxiety control my choices?

So the challenge and the invitation this week is to notice when you're being reactive instead of responsive, to notice when you're making decisions based on what you're against rather than what you're for. And some questions to sit with would be, what parts of your life are you actually choosing you?

What parts are just rubber band reactions? What are you still trying to prove to people who may never give you what you're looking for? What would change if you stopped needing your family to be different for you to be okay?

Next week we'll talk about what it looks like to break these cycles, but this week we're just in observation mode, noticing patterns. Because awareness is the first step towards freedom. Would you pray with me?

Spirit of God, I thank you that you are a God who gives us families and community and that we are not forced to walk alone. And yet, God, sometimes we shake our fists saying, why this family?

[42 : 06] Why this community? God, don't you see? Haven't you heard? So God, would you remind us that we're not alone, that you are with us and that you are squeezing good out of every ounce of bad that has been thrown at us.

You are God of redemption. You are the author of life. And you have not authored our lives in such a way that anything is wasted. But God, you are God of redemption and transformation.

And there's not a moment in our lives that you were not present for and that you were not beckoning towards us with love.

God, I pray for my friends and family in front of me listening online.

God, I pray that you would give them eyes to see that they might be able to offer themselves grace and they might be able to offer grace even to their enemies and even their families.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.