

# AVERAGE JOE

## The Making of a Leader

Text: Genesis 37

### I

It is no secret that we are living through one of the most unusual political seasons in memory. In a short while, we'll cast our votes for the candidate we believe is best suited to lead America and the free world. As we make that decision, I hope we'll remember the words of a famous American general. General Norman Schwarzkopf once said: "Leadership is a potent combination of two things: Character and strategy. But if you have to be without one, relinquish strategy."

There's no doubt that every candidate in the race for President IS a character. But who has the specific traits of character we most need in our next leader? Who has the courage to be bold when that is needed and self-restrained when that counts most? What does the way they have managed power or handled temptation or dealt in the dark with the lives of others say about their fitness to lead? Can they tell the truth or take responsibility for their failures? What oozes out when they are under pressure?

Alongside our examination of policy strategies, we ought to keep questions like these in mind as we assess the candidates – but also ourselves. While we may think of ourselves as too average to apply the title, all of us are leaders in some fashion. Every day, your manner of dealing with power and possessions, with pain and pleasure, with privilege and people, sends out ripples across the coffee cup of your family, your friendships, your workplace, church, and community. What kind of a leader are you?

In the house where I grew up there hung a poster with the words of another individual who once ran for President. While his character was far from perfect, John F. Kennedy, Jr. was right when he said that: "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try." What do you suppose is the difference God wants YOU to make and where and how are you trying? What does he need to refine in you so you can make that difference? And how is he using circumstances to make you a better leader?

### II

No story in the Bible better illustrates God's power to develop an ordinary person into an extraordinary person of influence than the tale of the person we're going to unpack together today and in coming weeks. When we meet him in Genesis 37, Joseph, son of Jacob, is just an Average Joe. Amidst a society that prized and privileged first-born males, but Joe was the eleventh of

twelve sons. In other words, when the plates got passed around at the family dinner table, you can imagine how skimpy Joseph's portion was. He had to have been one of the skinniest kids in town.

But little Joseph had one thing going for him that almost every eventual leader also has. The Bible says: **Now [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate a robe for him.** (Gen 37:3). This robe that tradition has named the "coat of many colors," or Broadway dubbed the "technicolor dreamcoat," is an immensely powerful symbol. By giving him this robe, Joe's dad was saying in effect: "You may look eleventh-rate right now, but I see you in the splendor of what you can become."

Over the years, I've talked with a lot of people who became very influential. I've sat with the matriarchs of great families and the heads of non-profit organizations who've made very big ripples. As a moderator of the Executives Breakfast Club, I've interviewed the leaders of dozens of household name companies. But the common thread I hear is that every one of these leaders had a Jacob in their life. Leaders are made, in part, by SOMEBODY who truly believed in their potential.

Are you robing the people around you with that kind of encouragement? It's one of the most ripple-making forms of leadership you can ever exercise. A love like that can completely change a life, as it did Joseph's. That skinny, hungry kid would go on to lead an enterprise that kept millions from starving to death in a time of famine. And do you understand that your Heavenly Father already looks at YOU this way? God doesn't see you in all your skinny inadequacy. He views you robed in the splendid righteousness of Jesus and mainly sees what, by his glorious grace, you can yet become.

So, take this in: God can make a technicolor leader from any background. They can be wealthy, well-resourced people like King Solomon or the business owner, Lydia, in the New Testament. But they can also come from way down the totem-pole beginnings, like Joseph. The key is that they need someone who believes in them, the way God believes in you, to help catalyze their potential. Ride that ripple or start that ripple in someone else's life. It's part of the making of a leader.

### III

There's always a danger, of course, when you've had people who believe in you, or God has blessed you in unusual ways, that you come to believe that you've robed yourself -- instead of seeing that it is Grace that has been clothing and carrying you all along the way. You can come to believe that that others ought to show deference to you. Think about the character risk face faced by someone who has already been the First Lady and then gains the title of

Secretary of State. Think about the challenge presented to someone who inherits a real estate fortune and then is fortunate enough to survive calamities that have destroyed other people? Both of these people face a crisis of character. They have to decide: Is this a position God has given me in order to help others flourish? Or is this a position from which I will choose to exult and exalt myself?

If you read through Genesis 37, you see that Joseph failed this character test. God reveals to him in a dream that one day he'll rise from his eleventh place position in life to a place where he will be able to exert a great influence on others. It's a wild and exciting vision. Joseph could have smiled in humble gratitude that he might one day become such a leader. But Joe is too immature at this point to respond that way. The insecurity he's experienced as the eleventh kid, now gets inflated into an awful arrogance. **He said to [his brothers], "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."** (Gen 37:7)

A grandmother I read about recently shared an experience that echoes this scenario: "My granddaughter received a watch and perfume for her birthday. Melissa was so excited she pestered everyone all day to look at her watch and smell her cologne. At dinner her mother said, 'Honey, I know you're proud of your gifts, but please don't mention them while we eat.' All through dinner Melissa sat silently, although she sniffed audibly at times and often raised her wrist to listen to her watch. As the meal came to an end, she blurted out, 'I'm not supposed to mention it, but if anyone hears anything or smells anything, it's me.'"

Have you been like Melissa? You've been graced in some way, but it mixes with your insecurity and it goes to your head. Instead of using your influence humbly, it becomes too much about you. The conversation becomes all about my ratings, my needs, my opinions, my hurts over the people criticizing me, my plans and position, my destiny. That's what happened with Joseph. He knew he was the apple of his dad's eye and gloated about it. He talked repeatedly about how his brothers, and even the sun and the moon and the stars would bow before him (Gen 37:9).

Listen to the result of this character flaw: **When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.** (Gen 37:4) **And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.** (Gen 37:8) So, on one occasion, when Joseph went out to meet his brothers in the fields where they were tending the family flocks, **they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him... "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns... Then we'll see what comes**

**of his dreams.”** (Gen 37:18-20)

This isn't like the story of Cinderella, where a really lovely kid is hated by a couple of irrationally jealous step-siblings. You've got to be a pretty bad character to have all TEN of more mature siblings come to hate you and want you dead. At this point in the story, Average Joe is an above average jerk. And that's where the story would have ended, had not his brother Reuben stepped in and argued for just beating the snot out of Joe, tossing him in a well, and leaving him to starve to death.

As it happened, however, an Arab slave train suddenly appeared over the horizon and one of the other brothers, Judah, saw a means of getting rid of Joseph and scoring a financial windfall at the same time. **So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.** (Gen 37:28) Then the brothers slaughtered a goat, dipped Joseph's special robe in its blood, and took it back to their father, convincing him that little Joe had been devoured by a ferocious animal. **Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.** (Gen 37:36)

#### IV

Here's a truth about leadership, as unpleasant as it is: Before God can MAKE a leader, there are things he may need to BREAK. Joe's pride needed breaking, as I know it needed breaking in me. So, what needs breaking in you? What does God want to change so much in your character that he'll let you down into a pit, or march you through a desert journey, or let you suffer a period of bondage, to purge you of it? Sometime in the next week, ask somebody that you know loves you and believes in you: What, if it was finally broken or changed, would make me an even better influence in the lives of others?

Let me say something REALLY politically and psychologically and sociologically incorrect. It is a blessing when our character flaws catch up with us. It hurts. It can bring us to a pretty miserable place. But it doesn't mean God has abandoned us. On the contrary, sometimes God may bring us to a breakdown to precipitate a breakthrough.

My friend, John Ortberg, tells of an impoverished young man who dreamed of a better life. Saving everything he could and borrowing heavily to cover the rest, he opened a grocery business with a partner. One of this man's early flaws, however, was that he was a poor judge of character. His partner turned out to have a serious drinking problem and the two of them ended up so far in the hole the business failed. It took that young man more than a decade to climb out of that pit and get free of the shackles of debt. But one day he was clear. He decided to try law instead of business and then to run for office. And in

1860, that same man, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of a not very United States.

A great fan of Shakespeare, Lincoln's favorite quote came from Hamlet: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, roughhew them as we may." As Ortberg says, Lincoln "came to believe this deeply about his own life, but also about the nation he led. His entire second inaugural address is a... profound reflection on how God was at work" in the struggles of our nation "in ways more mysterious and profound than any human being could fathom. What a loss it would have been—not just to [Lincoln] but to a whole nation—if the doors of that little grocery he started hadn't closed."

As we go from here today, remember these ideas: One person can make a difference and everyone should try. Leadership is a potent combination of character and strategy, but if you have to major on one, choose character. God can make a leader from any background, any kind of dysfunction. But they need someone who believes in them – like God believes in you. They need a love that will push them to confront the flaws in their character. As we'll see in the life of Joe in weeks ahead – and discover in ours – you never know what God will use in the making of a leader.

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Clara Null, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Christian Reader, "Kids of the Kingdom."  
John Ortberg, All the Places You'll Go. Except When You Don't (Tyndale, 2015), pp. 216-217