

“The Jealousy of Joseph’s Brothers”

Genesis 37:1-11

Let’s turn in our Bibles this morning to Genesis 37, where we will read from verses 1-11. Last week, we began a study of the life of Joseph, whose story spans 14 chapters in the book of Genesis. There is more space given to him than any of the other important characters who are found—more than Adam, more than Noah, more than Abraham, and more than his father Jacob. And perhaps the reason for this is due to the fact that Joseph presents us with one of the clearest pictures of Jesus that we find anywhere in the Bible. He is a beloved son, a rejected brother, and a suffering servant, who then becomes an exalted savior of his people. And so we are looking at Joseph, but we are really going to see Jesus. (Read)

When we are first introduced to Joseph, he is a young man of seventeen, the favorite among his father’s sons, who will give him a token of his love in the form of a multi-colored robe. Of course, this provokes jealousy among the other brothers who come to despise Joseph. No less than five separate times are we told in these verses that his brothers hate Joseph, they cannot speak peacefully to him, and they are jealous of him. Their jealousy and hatred will reach a boiling point, so that by verse 18 it erupts into murderous intentions. No wonder we refer to jealousy as the “green-eyed monster” that it truly is. It was William Shakespeare who coined the phrase “green-eyed monster” in referring to jealousy, made famous in “Othello” where the character is warned:

*“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.”*

To say it is a “monster” emphasizes how destructive and irrational jealousy can be. It cannot be tamed or domesticated, but will turn on you in a ferocious way. One person has suggested that jealousy is the sin that no one talks about. Like a monster, it often lurks in the shadows of our heart and hides from the light of day. And because we don’t talk about it does not mean it isn’t there. Jealousy is common in our world, and is all too common in our lives. It is widespread, yet far more subtle than you and I realize. Sins

such as lust, greed, or hatred announce their presence by not so subtly banging on the door of our lives. But jealousy likes to slip in unnoticed. It will operate under the radar so that we barely notice it and are blinded to its presence.

There are a lot of different ways jealousy is often seen in a person's life. There is professional jealousy, such as those who are in the same line of work. There is social jealousy, or when a person wants to be seen among the right group of people. There is educational jealousy, where a person is envious of another's accomplishments or degrees or what ever. More recently is the phenomena of 'social media' jealousy, where a person can find themselves envying the people they follow online and their perfectly curated social media posts. So that they compare themselves with others and feel like they have to somehow keep up.

Now, I think I should point out the fact that there is also a godly jealousy which is mentioned in Scripture. There is a righteous kind of jealousy, that being God's jealousy for His people. For instance:

Exodus 34:14—“You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

This is not rooted in insecurity, but in love and covenant faithfulness. The apostle Paul expresses godly jealousy in 2 Corinthians 11:2, desiring the church's pure devotion to Christ. Godly jealousy is protective and pure, not selfish or sinful like human jealousy. But that is not really the kind of jealousy that you and I wrestle with in our lives. Nor is it the kind we find mentioned here in our text. The story of Joseph and his brothers is a classic story of sibling rivalry, jealousy which exists among members of the same family. Who knows how much collateral damage has been caused in families over jealousy, for whatever reason.

J. John—*“We overlook jealousy because we consider it to be a harmless vice...yet it can become a psychological cancer that affects all we are. Consider the Christian duty to love others; jealousy renders that impossible. How about the command to praise God? Jealousy distorts everything. In French, the word ‘jealousy’ means both the*

emotion and the window blind, and it is a fitting match; jealousy shuts out the light to our soul. The jealous find themselves blinded to both the good of others and their own blessings.”

No wonder jealousy is such a monster to contend with!

Not only is it a monster, but jealousy is like a harmful weed that takes root, begins to grow, and very soon spreads and poisons everything. When its seed takes root beneath the surface in our hearts, it starts to shoot and show itself, and before long will bear its poisonous fruit in our lives.

For a few minutes this morning, I want us to consider the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers and think of it as the harmful, poisonous plant that it truly is, and uproot it lest we soon find it in ourselves. First of all, notice how their jealousy is:

1 – FUELED by preference shown to another (37:1-4)

“Jacob lived in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.”

It is evident that by the time Joseph was age 17, he had seen more of the ugly side of life than many people ever witness in a lifetime. Last time, we considered some of his background and the brokenness and dysfunction that had manifested itself in Jacob’s family. In this family, there is one man with four wives, and 12 sons by those wives, so the situation was ripe for chaos within the family structure. Joseph is the first born son of Rachel and his father loves him in an exclusive way that is not shown to the other sons. And we’re already getting this sense in the text that in some special way, God has something planned for Joseph which will become even more apparent through his dreams.

Jacob's partiality

Verse 2 says that when Joseph was 17, he was pasturing the flock with his older brothers. And when they came back home, he did something that I imagine every younger sibling has threatened to do on the older—"I'm telling dad!" Joseph brings back a 'bad report' of his brothers to their father. Now, what are we to make of this report? Some would have us believe that Joseph is being an annoying tattletale, a little brother who is jumping at the chance to get his older brothers in trouble. But I don't see this as being the case. If anything, based on what we know about the character of Jacob's sons, they were certainly prone to get into trouble. They did have that reputation. I don't see any reason to assume anything other than Joseph is telling his father the truth. It was the painful and uncomfortable truth, but it was the truth. It might very well have been Jacob's intention to have Joseph report on his brothers' activity. Whatever motive we ascribe to Joseph's behavior, we know that the report he gave to his father was one of the things that fueled his brothers' hatred of him.

Verse 3 says, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age." It was certainly an unwise thing for Jacob to show favoritism the way that he does to Joseph. It will only create a sense of resentment among his other sons. And we might be left to wonder just how Jacob could have been so foolish in playing a game of favorites among his children. Jacob had seen this thing in his own life as a child. His father Isaac loved his brother Esau more than him. Jacob's mother had preferred him over his brother, and as a result of that he had been introduced to all kinds of chaos. His relationship with his brother had been destroyed for years. And you would think it would have kept Jacob from such actions in relationship to his own sons, but it doesn't. Instead, history repeats itself. He contributes to his family's dysfunction.

Ephesians 6:4—"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

Colossians 3:21—"Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."

Now while Joseph's might not have been the ideal family situation, there is much for us to learn here. Parents must not play favorites among their children! Some of you may have this problem. It might not be as obvious, but it is no less of a problem in your home than it was in Jacob's. It could be there are children who are natured more like you, or those which are easier to raise. Others may require a lot more of your patience. But it is important that our children know we love them for who they are individually.

John Lennox — *“Some of us may have Jacob's problem. When children are small, they do not occupy much space, though they may occupy a lot of time and attention. But gradually those of us who are parents become aware that our space and tie are increasingly filled by powerful young minds, hearts, and wills—all of them different from each other and from us. Some are agreeable and others problematic, if not downright difficult. It is easier to favor the children that are like us and to distance ourselves from those who are unlike us.” (Do no wrong, do no right)*

Sometimes we're harder on the children who are the most unlike us. So that we need to stop and consider what this might be communicating to their heart. Friends, that's why raising children is not for the faint of heart. It will never be easy. God has sufficient grace for weary moms and dads!

Joseph's promotion

Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons, so that verse 3 says, “And he made him a robe of many colors.” The Hebrew word used there means ‘wrists’ or ‘ankles,’ and it describes a tunic that was sleeved and extended to the ankles. It refers to a special robe woven together from many different and colorful pieces of dyed fabrics. The NIV calls it an ‘ornate robe.’ There's no mention anywhere in the text that Jacob gave a gift like this to any of his other sons, only Joseph. Now, the important thing here isn't so much that this robe was very valuable, although I'm sure it was. Nor was it simply a display of Jacob's affection for his son, which we know it was. However, the real thing for us to understand is that this robe puts Joseph in a class all by himself. There was something about wearing this robe that spoke of leadership—which wouldn't naturally fall to a 17 year old in the family! It would have most naturally gone to Reuben, who

was the oldest, the firstborn son of Leah. Yet Reuben had violated his father's trust in an ugly detail that is mentioned in Genesis 35:22.

And so there's more going on with this 'coat of many colors' than we realize. In Jacob's mind, as he thought of future leadership within the family, that burden would pass to the son who was born to the wife he loved, to the firstborn son of Rachel. Although he is only 17 at the time, Joseph had already been establishing himself as a trustworthy man of character. So in giving him this ornate robe, Jacob sets him apart from his other sons.

Charles Swindoll — *“You can't work very well in a garment that has sleeves and extends all the way down to the ankles, especially if it's a costly, richly ornamented robe. It would be like sending a welder to a construction site wearing a full-length mink coat. In Joseph's day, the working garb was a short, sleeveless tunic. This left the arms and legs free so that workers could easily maneuver and move about. As you can imagine, by giving Joseph this elaborate full-length coat, which was also a sign of nobility in that day, his father was boldly implying, ‘You can wear this beautiful garment because you don't have to work like those brothers of yours.’”*

Joseph's coat exempts him from the tasks which the other brothers had to face. And obviously, it got under their skin, so that every time they saw him wearing it, they resented him. The robe was Jacob's way of showing his partiality of Joseph and promoting him to a place of future leadership among his sons. It was as if he were saying, “You're the future of this family. I can trust you more than I can trust them.” Of course, this favoritism will only foster a sense of jealousy and hatred among his other sons. Verse 4 says, “But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.”

There are a lot of factors at play which fuel the brothers' jealousy. While they might have gotten the raw end of the deal when it came to Jacob's affection, they are personally responsible for their emotions and actions. Their jealousy, while it may be understandable, is not justifiable. And in our own lives, jealousy often bristles at the

promotion of someone else over us. It often begins in small, quiet comparisons—but left unchecked, it steals our joy, corrupts our calling, and poisons our relationships.

James 3:16—“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

Jealousy opens a can of worms that will wiggle off in every direction in your heart. That’s why the Bible has so very much to say about jealousy, showing that it is a destructive emotion rooted in selfishness, pride, and a lack of trust in God’s goodness. For instance, jealousy is listed as a work of the flesh:

Galatians 5:19-21 —“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity...jealousy, fits of anger...those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Jealousy is listed among the sins of the sinful nature. This shows that jealousy is not a minor issue, but it is spiritually dangerous and incompatible with life in the Spirit. It must not be allowed to occupy any real estate in our hearts.

Jealousy breeds disorder and evil. Again, James 3:16 tells us that where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will also be disorder and every vile practice. In other words, it opens the door to greater sin and chaos. The problem with jealousy is that it does not stay isolated. Rather, it grows into conflict, manipulation, and division. Wherever it takes root in a person’s heart, it always spreads to take over. (illus. of Kudzu)

Jealousy destroys relationships. It is the opposite of ‘agape’ love:

1 Corinthians 13:4—“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant.”

Proverbs 14:30—“A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.”

Jealousy is the opposite of love and undermines unity. It decays our inner life and poisons our ability to love others well. Jealousy comes from a heart fixated on ‘self.’

James 4:2—“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel...”

Ecclesiastes 4:4—“And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Jealousy reveals that we are measuring ourselves against others rather than finding our identity in Christ. It reflects a lack of trust in God’s provision and a desire to control or compete with others. Where this takes root, it will produce its vile poison, so that it will eventually corrupt everything it touches. We can watch how this happens with Joseph’s brothers. A second thing about their jealousy is that it is:

2—FED until it becomes hatred (37:5-8)

“Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, ‘Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.’ His brothers said to him, ‘Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?’ So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”

The jealousy that takes root will soon rise within their heart and become full blown hatred. This is seen when Joseph begins having dreams and telling his brothers about them. Now, perhaps this was youthful ignorance on his part, not knowing how to read the room. Most of us don’t tend to be very ‘socially aware’ at 17. Or, it may have even been a bit of youthful arrogance. If they’re jealous of his robe of many colors, then the dreams he shared with his brothers would most certainly send them over the edge.

Joseph dreamed two dreams, which are really one and the same:

- eleven sheaves bowing down to his sheaf
- sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him

His dreams involved his exaltation and them bowing down in submission at his feet. Younger sons certainly did not rule over older ones. And so as Joseph shares his

dreams, the result is that his brothers hate him even more and they envy him in their hearts. He was the favored son who was no doubt to be their father's heir, and now he was telling them about dreams in which he was lord over them. It was all too much for them. Instead of being able to rejoice with him, their latent jealousy responds in further hatred. What I want you to see is this:

Their jealousy is progressive

You will notice in the verses how their jealousy festers and is progressive until it becomes full blown hatred.

- "...they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him." (Verse 4)
- "...they hated him even more." (Verse 5)
- "...they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words." (Verse 8)
- "...his brothers were jealous of him." (Verse 11)

There is a progression here. What begins with feelings of resentment leads to unkind words and will soon manifest in murderous actions.

Their jealousy is possessive

Joseph's brothers are entirely consumed by their jealousy by the time we get to verse 11. That's what the green-eyed monster will do in your life, friend. It will eat you alive until you are no longer the same person you once were. It will consume you like it did to Cain, to Joseph's brothers, and to King Saul. Antonio Salieri was a very respected and accomplished composer in the 18th century, but when a younger man named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart emerged as a musical genius, Salieri became intensely jealous. Despite Salieri's own skill and standing, he saw in Mozart a brilliance and creativity that he himself lacked. This jealousy gnawed at his soul. Though Salieri outwardly appeared to support Mozart, he secretly harbored a deep envy and plotted to undermine him. If you've seen the movie *Amadeus*, the jealousy of Salieri is portrayed

as being so consuming that it drives him to sabotage Mozart's career and contribute to his early death.

That is what unchecked jealousy will do in a person's life. If you feed it, it will fester and fester until it consumes you. Like a bitter pill, it will affect everything in your life. And you may in fact find yourself trying to sabotage another person through rumor or character assassination. The Bible says:

Hebrews 12:15—“Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.”

Jealousy is fueled by preference shown to another above ourselves, it is fed until it becomes hatred, and then notice a third thing. Jealousy is always:

3—FORGETFUL of God's good purpose (37:9-11)

“Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, ‘Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?’ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.”

What I want you to see is that their jealousy begins with a tinge of resentment. Joseph had received their father's favor, they had not. That resentment is then nursed in their hearts until it becomes full blown hatred. They hate their brother because of his favored place and for his special dreams. And their hatred then becomes murderous as they plot to kill him in verse 18. What begins with jealous emotion will result in attempted murder.

R.T. Kendall—*“Jealousy sometimes manifests as fear or resentment of another's success, speaking against the person, going on a vendetta to hurt their credibility, keeping them from being admired, or actually engaging in a conspiracy to destroy them—as in the case of King Saul pursuing David.”*

But the origin of jealousy can always be traced back to our own personal insecurity. It is part of fallen human nature, the evidence of sin. And it first reared its ugly head not far from the garden as Cain's jealousy led him to murder Abel.

Jealousy is often the motive behind competition and games of comparison we like to play. I caught myself doing this a couple years ago. For whatever reason, I felt very proud of myself if I beat my next door neighbors to the lawn mower. If I was out mowing my grass earlier than they were, I felt superior and proud. When my grass was mowed and the yard looking good, I'd find myself looking with contempt on all the other slackers in the neighborhood. Jealousy and envy is the spirit that leads us to 'outdo' another in some accomplishment. Instead of celebrating another's success, I've got to do better than them. Because if I don't, I'm less valuable. Or so it goes in our minds.

Ecclesiastes 4:4—“Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.”

In other words, we've all got to 'keep up with the Jones' in life. Are you familiar with that expression? It means trying to match or surpass your neighbors or friends in terms of social status, wealth, or material possessions. It is often used to describe the pressure people feel to buy things or live a certain lifestyle just because others around them are doing so. For example, if so-and-so buys a new car, you feel like you need to buy one too just to stay on the same level. Jealousy and competition is the underlying reason. But when our eyes are on everybody else, it is a sure sign that we've taken our eyes off God and His purpose for our lives. Joseph's brothers are jealous to the point of hatred, but what they fail to see is the goodness of God. The very dreams that that they reject and resent will be God's way of providing for their future salvation!

Now, let me go through these points one more time as we finish up, and see how this applies to us:

- Jealousy is fueled by preference shown to others

Joseph's brothers are jealous of him because he had been given a special place by Jacob. Along those same lines, it might be that someone else has received something,

done something, been somewhere, and we may feel left out. But it is in these moments that jealousy will come looking for an opportunity in our hearts. Don't let it in the door.

- Jealousy is fed until it becomes hatred

When jealousy is nursed, it will only fester until it becomes hatred. Joseph's brothers are jealous, but that jealousy is fed until it leads to hatred. Then they scheme against him. Jealousy is one of Satan's favorite tools by which he brings us to ruin. Left unchecked, it will consume a person until it destroys them. It will leave a trail of carnage everywhere in its wake. It has divided more than one family. The sooner we see it in ourselves and deal with it, the better.

- Jealousy is forgetful of God's good purpose

Jealousy is always a sign that we've forgotten God's good purpose for our lives. It reveals the fact that we've taken our eyes off the real prize, which is knowing Jesus and to make Him known. The person who is following Jesus does not have time to be jealous of someone else.

John 21:21 — “When Peter saw [John] he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!’”

In other words, Peter needed to keep his eyes on Jesus and off everybody else. We need to keep in mind the fact that God is jealous for us, and He will not allow our hearts to be given to lesser things. If we were to fast forward from Genesis 37 to the gospel account, we would find the same attitude of Joseph's brothers being displayed to the Lord Jesus. John 1:11 says that He came unto His own, but His own received Him not. His sinless and perfect life was met with resentment from the Pharisees and from Judas who betrayed him for 30 pieces of silver. Matthew 27:18 says that Pilate knew it was because of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. His claim to be the Son of God provoked such hostility that the leaders of the nation crucified Him, screaming their hatred in Luke 19:14, “We do not want this Man to reign over us!” But God was providentially at work through it all. So that millions upon millions of people

world over have now bowed their knees to Jesus as Savior and Lord. And one day, every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. He was rejected, crucified, and raised so that sinners like me and you can be saved.

If you feel left out, forgotten, and without the favor that has been shown to others, remember God's grace in your life. If God never gave us another thing, He would already have given us far more than we could ever deserve. He has invited us to His banquet and has sat us down at the table of grace. In Christ, I have the Father's favor! In Christ, I have a robe of righteousness! What more could I ever need? And it is not on the basis of my own personal merit, but according to grace. We've all been more like Joseph's brothers than we care to admit. And unless Jesus came to save lost sinners, we'd have no hope.

Have you personally come to place your faith in Him?

I saw one of the coolest things yesterday on the news. It was a school somewhere in Tennessee where graduating high school seniors answered questions from their sixth grade selves in a video time capsule. When these seniors were in the 6th grade, they recorded video questions for their future selves to answer. It was amazing to watch the way that they had grown and changed, even tear jerking in some cases. One little fellow, talking with a lisp when he was in the sixth grade, asked the question, "What life advice would you have given me as a sixth grader?" His older self answered, "Be kind...to everyone, every time you can. You don't get a chance to take things back, or to do things differently, so try to do the best you can, that's all you can do."

I wonder if Joseph's brothers had a 'video time capsule,' what question might they have asked their older selves in years to come? And what 'advice' would their much older selves give to their younger selves? What about you? As we get older, we tend to look back on our younger selves with regret. "If only I knew then what I know now!" Maybe the things you thought were such a big deal then pale in comparison when you look at life in reverse. And so let's not waste any more precious time with jealousy.