

Just a Little Envy

When we look to the Scriptures for someone to model our life upon, we naturally look to the life of Jesus Christ.¹ He is the only pure and sinless model that we have. But there is someone in the Old Testament that, though he was a mere man, many Bible scholars view as being the closest *human model* to Christ that we have. And that man's name was Joseph. For the next few weeks, we will be examining the Scriptures to consider this man's life—the many peaks and valleys that Joseph passed through. His was surely a “roller-coaster” life, yet one that always stayed on the tracks that God had laid for him—he followed God's plan for his life through thick and thin.

The story of Joseph that begins in Genesis 37 is a familiar one. We could summarize Chapter 37 like this: His father, Jacob, gives Joseph a richly ornamented coat. Joseph's brothers hate him for it. Their hatred intensifies when Joseph reveals his dreams that suggest that his family will bow down to him some day. The brothers are tending sheep a good ways away from home, and Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. When Joseph shows up, his brothers plot to kill him by throwing him into the pit of a dried up well. They end up relenting from an actual murder, and sell Joseph to some Ishmaelite traders who, in turn, sell him into slavery in Egypt. That's generally how the story goes.

When we consider the lessons that this story teaches, we usually focus almost exclusively on Joseph and what transpires in the story from his perspective. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, we begin to see Joseph as being the example of a man of great faith—whether he's descended to the bottom of a dried up well, or if he ascended to the heights of power in Pharaoh's Egypt, Joseph always trusted in God. But God's Word is richer than that, and quite often a simple story teaches many lessons other than the main, most obvious one. And that's the way it is with Genesis 37—particularly if we began to assess the story from the perspective of Joseph's brothers. So let's do exactly that.

Joseph's story starts out on what might seem to be a high note for him because he receives this wonderful coat—sometimes we refer to it as the “coat of many colors.” It was a gift from his father Jacob. Ordinarily, a gift from a father to a son is usually a good thing. But here it was a big problem, and the problem was this: Jacob's 10 other sons didn't receive any gift. And because of that, we begin to see a road being paved. And this road would lead to a very dark and dangerous pit into which these brothers would eventually pitch Joseph. Think about how things developed in such a way that led them to do this dreadful and evil act—because therein lies one of those valuable lessons that we need to

learn. How did these brothers come to such a morally low position that they'd throw a human being—especially their own brother—into a pit to die?

Well, as I mentioned, it began with that incredibly extravagant coat and the reason Jacob gave it to Joseph. Genesis 37:3 (ESV) tells us: “Now Israel [Jacob] 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.” Notice the reason that Jacob's love for Joseph is greater than that of his other sons is: “He was the son of his old age.” Now what does that mean? The answer lies in the fact that Jacob's other sons were by his wives, Bilhah, Zilpah and Leah.² But Joseph—well, Joseph was special because he was born of Jacob's first love, Rachel. And that made him very special indeed in the eyes of Jacob. But as you may recall, Rachel did not give birth to Joseph until late in Jacob's life. So here you have something quite unusual for a family of the ancient world. Normally, the oldest son was given great honor—in this case, that would have been Reuben. Yet, Jacob favored his youngest son, at least the youngest that was born up to this time. (Benjamin would not come until later.) There is a negative and a positive that comes out of this. The negative springs from the fact that Jacob's favoritism for one son, Joseph, is not the best way to preserve family harmony. The positive is that this could be pointing to something that has nothing to do with family relationships, but has a lot to do with faith. Could it be that we are beginning to see a glimpse of Jesus' message in this very early part of the story. Jesus would later say: “The first will be last, and the last will be first”?³ It's a thought that God gives honor, not to those according to earthly honors, but according to a person's faithfulness. Faith trumps honors—and so the last becomes first in God's way of ordering things.

But, let's get back to the reactions of Joseph's brothers. **How** did they react to this fine gift that their father bestowed upon Joseph? Well, as I mentioned earlier, in a nutshell—not too well. Genesis 37:4 (NIV) tells us: “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.” Let's put this into perspective as if we were in the shoes, or sandals, of the brothers. What would this be comparable to today? It would be like Jacob giving you a skateboard as a gift, but giving your brother, Joseph, a Mercedes Benz. It would be like your boss at work giving that lazy, good-for-nothing co-worker a giant raise in salary, plus a bonus, but not even giving you the time of day. It would be like that cheating, low-life neighbor of yours (who curses a blue streak out of while in private, beats his wife when no one is looking, and lives the life of a closet-alcoholic) being nominated by your neighbors as “Husband of the Year”—while all they do for you is complain that you don't keep your front yard grass neatly trimmed. How would things like that make you feel? How would most people react? The truth probably is that most people would be envious and

resentful. And that's exactly how Joseph's brothers felt. When we read this story, we generally focus on Joseph's plight—after all, he's the one who gets thrown into the pit. Maybe our focus needs to be more on the brothers. Maybe our focus needs to be more on the terrible, awful problem of **envy**.

Way back in the 14th century there was a preacher's manual which told just how deadly envy can be. The manual stated that envy was "the most precious daughter of the devil because it follows his footsteps by hindering good and promoting evil." Envy is such a malicious thing. When we become followers of Jesus, envy is something that we must put behind us. In fact, Paul in his letter to Titus writes: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in **malice and envy**, being **hated and hating** one another." Titus 3:3 (NIV) Warren Wiersbe writes: "Envy causes inward pain when we see others succeed, and malice produces inward satisfaction when we see others fail. Envy and malice usually generate slander and unwarranted criticism; and when these two sins hide behind the veil of religious zeal and self-righteousness, the poison they produce is even more deadly."⁴ As Christians, we are under the eye of the world—our friends, neighbors, co-workers—the man or woman behind you in the line at Hardee's. The world is watching us and God expects us to show love in our actions. It is the best kind of witnessing that we can give. But, if we give in to envy in our personal lives, it sours into malice and eventually rots into hate. And, the world can see this in us—which will make us negative witnesses. The world already has enough hate—it does not need to see it in us.

Sometimes we tend to think of envy and resentment as "little" sins, but that's not the case. Resentful envy is a "big" sin. It breaks the 10th Commandment—the one that says: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor"—including his or her Mercedes Benz, his or her hike in salary or the praise he or she gets from their peers. Exodus 20:17 (NIV) We have already seen how Paul links envy with hate. And he is so very right. **Resentful envy** is the seed that grows into **hate**. The tree of hate produces the fruits of **malice** and **anger** that manifests itself in all kinds of evil.

But, that's not a problem for us, now is it?—not in our modern, technologically advanced society. We are not envious of each other—how can we be when we are so connected by Facebook? But, wait a minute—could that be a problem? Not too long ago, a study was conducted by Bradley University and the University of Missouri Columbia that came to a shocking conclusion. They found that continuous users of Facebook often experience envy so severe that it can lead to extreme sadness, even to depression. The researchers studied 736 college students and found that those people who actively flip from one Facebook page to another to "keep up with their friends" may actually be trying to "keep

up with the Jones,” so to speak. And through this form of social media, they often begin to feel that their lives don’t measure up, and they begin to feel intensely envious. One professor at the University of Missouri explained it this way: “If Facebook is used to see how well an acquaintance is doing financially or how happy an old friend is in his relationship—things that cause envy among users—use of the site can lead to feelings of depression.”⁵ And apparently this isn’t just a college-age phenomenon—those who are middle aged and older appear to experience these same negative effects. Reflecting upon this sad commentary of our “technologically advanced” society, the essayist, Joseph Epstein, comments that: “[E]nvy makes us look ungenerous, mean, [and] small-hearted. No wonder nobody wants to own up to this unhappy sin!”⁶ Now, I don’t want to sound like I am picking on Facebook alone. The philosophical premise of advertisements and commercials today is that if they can make you envious of someone else—someone who uses their product or enjoys the service that they are peddling. If they can plant a seed of envy in your mind, then you will be motivated to go out and spend money to buy the product or service to satisfy your envious desires. That’s the world we live in today.

But, what about on the family level?—have things really changed that much since the brothers got together and threw Joseph into the well? Not really—today’s research studies show that envy continues to be a serious family problem. In fact, these studies suggest that up to 45% of adult siblings have relationships marked by envy that causes unhealthy rivalry and ill will toward each other.⁷ But, what does God’s Word tell us? Psalm 133 urges us to pursue family harmony, not envy, when it says: ¹ “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! [Now that includes sisters, and mothers and fathers, as well. And it goes on to say:] ² It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the **collar of his robes.**” Psalm 133:1-2 (NIV) The only thing that was running down the collars of Joseph’s multi-colored robe was the blood of a goat that his brothers smeared on it to fool Jacob into thinking a wild beast had killed him.

What a terribly dysfunctional family Joseph and his brothers lived in! And again, how did it come to be this way?—by allowing one sin to blossom into another until finally everything is out of control. And that’s one of the crucial lessons in this story. There is no such thing as a little sin that will stay little for very long—particularly when that sin is envy. That’s how Joseph’s brothers, overtime, sank to their morally depraved state. We need to be mindful of that—quash those envious thoughts before they get the best of us, because once such discord arises—especially within a family setting—it’s really difficult to put things back together again.

In closing, think about a story that recently appeared in the Wall Street Journal about two brothers. One of those brothers was Al Golden and his twin brother was named Elliott. They grew up in

Brooklyn, N.Y., graduated from the same college and then married within a month of each other in 1947. But as they were growing up, they were constantly comparing their individual accomplishments against each other—from their grades in school to their performance in sports. Eventually, Elliott Golden became a lawyer and rose to the level of a state Supreme Court judge. Al, on the other hand, settled into his own business that manufactured mirrors and then sold life insurance. In the news article, Al admitted that he always envied his brother's high social status and his professional position as a judge. Interestingly enough, it was Elliott who one day turned to Al and commented: "I am a lawyer. How come you make more money than me?" Al believed that what he really meant was: "How come you are making more than me when you are not as successful?" (You see, envy makes you hear things in some strange and distorted ways sometimes.) Al's envy fed on that comment and he confessed: "It made me feel good [to hear him say that]." One day, Elliott accused Al of not doing enough to take care of their aging mother. Consequently, Al cut off all communication with his brother for more than a year. But, in his heart, Al knew that it wasn't so much what his brother said as it was all of that jealousy and envy that had built-up over the years. Even though his brother repeatedly reached out to him, as did other family members, Al ignored their pleas for reconciliation. Then one day Al received an email from his brother that recounted a story that he had read. It was about two men who owned properties that were divided by a stream and they had been very envious of each other for many years. So, one of the men decided to hire a carpenter to build a fence along the stream. But, as it turns out, the carpenter got mixed up and built a bridge instead. Al thought about the email and he couldn't get that story out of his mind. So he emailed back and this is what he wrote: "***'I'd like to walk over the bridge.'***" And that's exactly what he did. He reconciled with his brother. And it's a good thing that he crossed that "bridge" when he did, because shortly thereafter his brother died.⁸

The story of Joseph's entire life, in many ways, is about bridge building. Maybe you are dealing with envy in your heart. Maybe it has estranged you from a family member—if so, you have some bridge building to do. Or maybe it's the kind of envy that those research studies revealed—the kind born of too much Facebook, or from absorbing too many commercials on TV—the kind of envy that longs for what others may have, but you don't—the kind of envy that leads to sadness and depression. The evil that grew from the envious nature of Joseph's brothers, as well as the envy and jealousies in our own hearts, can only be overcome a bridge builder, a carpenter in fact—more specifically, the Carpenter from Nazareth. Yes, in the mere man, Joseph, we can see a foreshadowing of the perfect, Son of Man—Jesus Christ. He builds a bridge like no other, because His bridge is constructed of a special kind of Wood—it is the wood of the Cross. And if you must envy anything, then envy His forgiveness, and His

mercy and His grace. When you engage in that kind of envy, it generates the very opposite of hate—it radiates the love of Christ and builds bridges over the widest of streams, and lets you cross over into the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
September 3, 2017
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

¹ 1 Peter 2:21 (WuestNT) ²¹ For to this very thing were you called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving behind for you a model to imitate, in order that by close application you might follow in His footprints.

² The sons of Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali, and the sons of Zilpah were Gad and Asher. Leah bore six sons to Jacob (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun) and a daughter (Dinah). Her handmaid, Zilpah, bore two sons to Jacob (Gad, Asher), which by the law of that day were officially Leah's. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, ed., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "LEAH," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

³ Matthew 19:30 (ESV) But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Authentic (Genesis 25-20)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 142.

⁵ Cara Reedy, "Too much Facebook leads to envy and depression," CNN Money (New York) First published March 2, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/02/technology/facebook-envy/index.html>.

⁶ Adapted from Arthur C. Brooks, "The Downside of Inciting Envy," *The Wall Street Journal* (3-1-14).

⁷ *Elizabeth Bernstein, "Sibling Rivalry Grows Up," Wall Street Journal (3-20-12); Preaching Today, Two Brothers Reconcile After Years of Envy, submitted by David Finch, Elk Grove, California.*

⁸ *ibid. Elizabeth Bernstein, "Sibling Rivalry Grows Up."*