

Genesis 37 Dealing with Envy Canterbury, November 22, 2015

When I went to boarding school I learnt a lot about myself. For a start, I was a bit shy. I didn't like to boast too much, yet back home, in Shepparton, I was good at sport. Everything changed in Melbourne. Suddenly I was just average! Not a bad tennis player, but I could forget any thought of playing for the school. In year 12, I only made it to the third eighteen football team. As for running, well I might have won if half way through the race they'd all turned around and run back to the starting line.

It was much the same for the other new boys in year 11 – except for John. He came to the school at the same time as I did. But things were different for John. He was Mr. Personality. His charming smile won everyone over. The teachers raved about him. But far worse, he was so good at sport. Tennis, football, athletics, he won the lot. I thought I was good at tennis – he thrashed me. And he'd have needed eyes in the back of his head to see me in the school athletics trials.

School colours were awarded to the better sportsmen. Those colours were ribbons that you sewed on your school blazer pocket. Because you wore your blazer to all sporting events, it was obvious to everyone who'd received school colours.

I wasn't awarded any colours. John won school colours in three sports. But they were not just general colours for doing well. He won honour colours. He was one of the best. Not only did that give him the three – triple colours – it meant that he had the whole pocket on his blazer changed. And it was no ordinary pocket with a bit of colour at the top. It was a brilliant shield. It was magnificent. You could see it a mile away. Those colours identified him as an outstanding athlete.

John had everything – personality, talent, ability, skill. He was admired by his teachers and his peers. At the school dances the girls found John irresistible. [I didn't like that either.]

Don't you hate people like that! It really consumes you with jealousy and envy. John came to the school at the same time as I did. 'Just because he smiled nicely at the teachers, he couldn't do a thing wrong in their sight.

Do you ever suffer from jealousy and envy? Your immediate response may well be, 'No!' Well, think again. For, I'm not just thinking about those who won't share or just want other people's possessions.

Do you ever look at someone and think, 'Thank the Lord, I don't look like him'? Or, 'I don't behave like she does'? Have you ever said to a young person, "Are, but you have youth on your side"? Far too often, we who are older lament the passing of youth. But we've had our day. We've had our opportunities. If we didn't make the most of them, that's our fault.

Such thoughts of envy break the 10th commandment, ***You shall not covet*** (Exodus 20:17). It may be good health that we covet. Or perhaps it's the blessing of talent and ability that God gives to others. Anything that we covet comes between God and us. And it's an idol. And so we then break commandments one and two.

Envy and jealousy consume us. They feed off one another. Like a cancer they eat us away inside, devouring body and soul. How would you deal with my schoolmate John? Was I envious and jealous of him? Oh yes! I'd have gladly thrown him in a pit and sold him into slavery. And that's what Joseph's brothers did to him. Why? Because they hated him. Jealousy and envy had consumed them.

Joseph was the first son born to Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife. So, from the very beginning this favouritism prepares us for what's to come in this chapter. We read in Genesis 37:3 that ***Israel*** [Jacob] ***loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age.*** Jacob may also have loved Joseph more because Rachel had died giving birth to his younger brother, Benjamin. Then in 37:4, we see how this affected Joseph's brothers. ***When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.***

The focus of these last 14 chapters of Genesis appears to be on Joseph. But that's not quite true. Another son, Judah, is more important. The Lord chose Joseph to provide for His covenant family, especially Judah. But that's not very obvious in Genesis 37. It also seems that while God is faithful, His people are not. Their lives are a mess. Just read Genesis 38 and you will see what I mean.

Yet God's plans cannot be frustrated. Listen to Genesis 50:20. There, Joseph reveals to his brothers how God had been at work through their difficulties. ***"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."*** But, back in chapter 37 they must have wondered how God could ever get involved in such a mess.

We have the same problem. Caught up in our own difficulties, we ask, 'Why?' Why does God allow bad things to happen to His people? Why is there so much envy and jealousy in the world? Even in the church! 'Why are others so blessed and I'm not?' How can we believe in the goodness of God in today's evil world? We won't get far today, but these Joseph/Judah narratives give us some understanding of how God works things for good and for His glory.

Remember Romans 8:28, ***And we know that in all things God works for the good...*** Note that God ***works for the good***. Note that Paul doesn't say, God works good things for His people. Instead, in all of life's events God works things out for what is best for us, His people. But we often don't see it immediately. That's how it was for Joseph and his brothers. In our times of trial we can only ask 'What is God teaching me at this time?' And then we must move on in faith. I'm sure that's what Joseph did, despite his difficulties.

In Joseph's case, God's purpose was that the covenant line be maintained. Jacob's son Judah was the one who needed protecting. In the family line of Judah would come the Messiah, Jesus. And it's in the Lord Jesus that God's covenant promises are fulfilled. For, in Him God has worked the greatest good. On the surface, the death and resurrection of Jesus appears to be bad. But God intended it for good, your good and mine. At the very least, by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection you and I enter into a right relationship with God.

Other things led to Joseph being sold into slavery? We've already seen Jacob's foolishness. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other children. Then (37:3) Jacob made Joseph ***a richly ornamented robe***. At the same time, Joseph demonstrated his own brand of folly. He treated his brothers with disdain. 37:2. Aged 17, ***he brought a bad report about them***. Then, with developing arrogance, he misinterpreted the importance of the two dreams God gave him. These dreams revealed the great service he'd later provide for the family. But in conceit he lifted himself above his father and brothers.

Joseph focussed on his own importance. 37:7, ***"your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."*** 37:9, ***"the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing to me."*** At this, even his father rebuked him. 37:10, ***"Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"***

How did these dreams affect his brothers? We've noted 37:4. They already ***hated him and could not speak a kind word to him*** because he was their father's favourite. After Joseph reported his dreams to them we read in 37:8 that ***they hated him all the more***. Then again in 37:11, ***His brothers were jealous of him***.

It's not a pretty picture, is it? Hatred, envy and jealousy are 'like sharks in a feeding frenzy'. Joseph's brothers can't tolerate his presence any longer. So, when he came to them (37:17), they decided to rid themselves of this arrogant, precocious and troublesome brother. They'd have killed him had not Reuben, the eldest brother, intervened. 37: 21, 22, ***"Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him."*** Later Judah formed the plan to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (= Midianites). And so Joseph came to Egypt. In 37:36 we read that ***the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard***.

What are the consequences of envy, jealousy and hatred? Joseph's brothers no longer believe in God's goodness. They lie about Joseph to their father. Jacob then mourned for his lost son. Together, father and sons reaped the misery of their faithlessness. Despite their misery, the Lord had planned for Joseph to go to Egypt. Joseph was to prepare for the coming of Israel. God was in control.

Many people have trouble believing in the goodness of God. Today, we need to be reminded of God's covenant faithfulness and goodness towards His people. In Lamentations 3:22, 23, we read that God's *compassions never fail. They are new every morning* And the message of the New Testament is no different. 1 Corinthians 1:9, ***God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.***

If we take our eyes off Jesus, we'll end up the same as Jacob and his sons. Our eyes shift onto ourselves and our neighbours. We focus on what they have that we don't. We covet their possessions or their husband or wife. Jealousy and envy consume us, and spiral down with murderous thoughts. On a large scale that's why one country fights to take over another. But that's easy for us to see and criticize. Meanwhile, we're blind to our own sinful desires and lusts.

A few years ago, I read the book *Facing the Fifties*. (You can guess why.) What disturbed me (more than being over 50) was how the author focuses on the self. So much so that he even encourages the breakdown of the marriage relationship. Jealousy and envy lead to death: the death of a friendship, family relationships, or even a marriage. And it leads to the death of our relationship with God.

There's only one way to deal with self-centred envy and jealousy: Jesus. For, in Christ ***are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*** (Colossians 2:3). ***You have been given fullness in Christ*** (2:10). Yet, we all feel envy and jealousy at some time or other. The writer to the Hebrews sets our focus right. 12:1b-2a, ***let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.***

Our problem is that we're trapped in the present. It's hard to see God's plan and purpose in life. We wrestle with difficulties in our relationships, just like Jacob and his family. We wonder what lies ahead. How can God work out bad things for our good?

Genesis 37-50 helps us to see life from both the human and divine points of view. From a human point of view, Joseph and his family are caught up with themselves. Their jealous behaviour doesn't reflect a life of faith. There's no deep and abiding trust in God's covenant faithfulness. Only in time will they see that what happened to them *God intended...for good*. For you see, God doesn't work with history, He determines it.

So, what's God's viewpoint? Is there something better for us? Yes there is! God's plan is that we trust in Christ. We read in Ephesians 1:11, 12, it is God ***who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.***

Or, as Paul writes in Romans 12:1, 2, ***offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual [reasonable] act of worship... be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** When we make Jesus Lord of our lives, there's no place for jealousy and envy.

The achievements of my school friend, John, don't bother me anymore. (Well, it all happened about 50 years ago.) You and I have an ever-present moment of glory: God loves us; Christ died for us. Through repentance and faith, God sees you and me as righteous, innocent. That's what matters the most. And I hope and pray that this is true for you *and* for me.

But, maybe you're thinking to yourself, "Can there really be any hope for me? I'm too much like Joseph's brothers?" Yes, there is hope! For, many years later, the brothers came to Joseph in Egypt. There, after Jacob had died, they begged Joseph to forgive their sins against him. In all their years in Egypt, they'd not dealt with what they'd done to their young brother, Joseph. But now they come seeking forgiveness of their sins. ***Joseph said to them, You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*** (50:20). Finally reconciled, the brothers went on to be leaders of God's chosen people.

Remember that the Lord Jesus was crucified for your sins and for mine. When we come to Him in repentance and faith, He restores us. We are reconciled to God, our Father. In Christ we find forgiveness of our sins. We have peace with God. In Christ we are content.

All that jealousy and envy that has eaten into our lives is laid upon Jesus. 1 Peter 2:24, ***He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree (cross), so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*** So there is a death that's good for us. It is to die to sins. And it is to live for righteousness, to do all things for the glory of God.

Even though we don't want to push the analogy too far, Joseph points us to the Lord Jesus. On the night on His betrayal, the Lord said to His disciples, ***"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."*** (John 15:18).

Praise God, we do not worship a dead Saviour. The Lord Jesus has overcome our enemy, death. Christ has risen from the grave and we are raised to new life in Him.

Through a personal relationship with Christ we have the antidote to envy and jealousy. Only in Christ can we be content with who we are and what we have. For, you see, contentment is the opposite of envy and jealousy.

Yet to be content is not to be complacent. It doesn't mean that we must simply accept the evils of this world. But it does mean that we are happy with our lot. Why? Because our life's fulfilment: our joy and our peace are found in union with the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus said (Matthew 6:33), ***seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** The answer to our self-centredness is found in union with Christ.

Have you received Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? Then continue to find the fulfilment of your life in Him. Read His Word and pray that His Spirit would lead you into His truth.

If you have not received Jesus as Lord and Saviour, then what direction is your life taking? What is the focus of your life? Upon whom or on what do you depend? What motivates you?

Outside of Christ you'll ultimately find that the centre of your life is you, yourself. If so, then now is the time for change. Put your trust in the Lord Jesus and rejoice in the life that God has ahead for you. For, the Lord Jesus isn't just the antidote to jealousy and envy. He's not just our helper. Nor is He just our example. Far more, He is our Rescuer. He has paid the price for our sin so that we might be reconciled to God. Amen