

Jealousy & Betrayal

Genesis 37 & 39:1-4

August 13, 2017

Genesis 37:1-11 tells this story, “Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob’s family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now Israel 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 robe for him. 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. Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: 7 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.” His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.”

Today we’re going to begin a 3-week series on the Old Testament story of Joseph. And the first part of Joseph’s story shows that there was a lot of bad blood between the members of his family. Over 3,000 years ago people were having the same kinds of family problems that we have today. And, just like us, before we were even born, there was a lot of family history; good and bad.

1. Joseph’s family had all kinds of problems with jealousy. Jealousy was in Joseph’s family of origin. Please turn in your Bible to Genesis 29. Back in Genesis 29, Joseph’s father, Jacob, went out looking for a wife. He worked 7 years to gain Rachel’s hand in marriage but he was tricked into marrying her older sister Leah first. So, he ended up marrying both of these sisters, Leah and Rachel. Without getting into a long discussion today regarding polygamy, let’s just recognize that Jacob ran into some trouble. He loved Rachel more than Leah and it lead these 2 wives into a life-long competition driven by jealousy. Genesis 29:30 tells us that “[Jacob’s] love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah.” Genesis 29:31 then tells us that, “When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.” Leah goes on to bear Jacob 4 sons in a row. Then Genesis 30:1 tells us, “When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became JEALOUS of her sister. So she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” Jealousy was a HUGE problem in Joseph’s family of origin.

Jacob was in a real pickle. So, the family comes up with the obvious solution... Jacob gets 2 MORE WIVES! Rachel and Leah both want Jacob to have children with their servants. And these servants each give him 2 more sons. So, Jacob is now up to 8 sons. At one point in this competition, in Genesis 30:8, Rachel actually says, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.” Well, not to be outdone, a few verses later, we learn that Leah ends up having 2 additional sons. In Genesis 30:20 Leah says, “God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat ME with honor, because I have borne him six sons.” So, in case you’ve lost count of the “tally” here: Jacob now has 4 wives: Leah w/ 6 sons, Rachel’s servant Bilhah has 2, and Leah’s servant Zilpah has 2. Rachel has none. 10 sons for Jacob, none of them w/ Rachel. Can you even begin to imagine the level of jealousy here? Mercifully, Genesis 30:22-24 tells us, “Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” She named him Joseph, and said, “May the LORD add to me another son.” Interestingly, Joseph’s name actually means “may he add.”¹ So, even after

¹ 2011 NIV Study Bible text note on verse 24, p. 58.

his birth, Joseph's mother is jealous for more sons. This is the environment that Joseph was born into; a family that was filled with jealousy.²

Sometimes it can be painful for us to learn about our families of origin. Every one of us has things in our family background that are good and God-pleasing. But, we also all have difficult and painful realities of things that were said and done before we were ever born. As we learn about the problems in our own family of origin, **we need to recognize 2 things:**

1) All of us have some problems in our families. I so much appreciate the honesty of Scripture about the human condition. When Moses wrote down the book of Genesis, he didn't pull any punches. He told it the way it was. You don't see revisionist history taking away these embarrassing and awkward details in the family tree. In fact, just the opposite, the Bible lets us know the reality of human relationships among God's people; there have always been struggles and challenges to getting along with one another. *Here's some great news:* God works in and through imperfect people and imperfect families. And it's a good thing that He does, otherwise there would be no one left for Him to work through! Our fallen sin condition is a real struggle for every single person. Therefore, we do well to treat each other with grace and understanding. Take some time this next week to read Genesis 27-33. As you read about all the lies and painful relational dynamics, let it remind you that God knows all the gritty details and He can handle it. Let it prompt you to call out to Him and pray for healing and forgiveness in your own particular family situation. Pray also for the personal grace and maturity to honor God in the way you handle your own particular family problems. The 2nd thing we need to recognize is that...

2) Each of us needs to decide whether we will repeat our same family mistakes. Or, whether we will rise above them. We are not responsible for anything that happened before we were born. But, we are responsible for what we do and say in the here and now. Unfortunately, Jacob ends up repeating his same mistake. Please turn your Bible to Genesis 37. Let's compare 2 verses, you'll notice an echo repeating from the past: Genesis 29:30 says, "[Jacob's] love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah." Genesis 37:3 says, "Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons..." Now, we recognize that Jacob had been tricked into marrying Leah. I'm sure that that made it tough for him to love her in the same way.

But it seems that after watching all of the pain and struggle this caused his wives, that this aged patriarch would have learned by now, not to repeat this with his kids.

But, instead, Genesis 37:3 goes on to tell us that Jacob had an ornate robe made for Joseph. Not for any of his other kids, just for Joseph. Now, as a parent, I've made my share of mistakes. But this one seems like Parenting 101; favoritism is one of those obvious "no-nos." I'm not sure why Jacob did this. Scripture mentions that Joseph had been born to him in his old age... as though that explains it. Joseph was only 17 when he received his ornate robe, but Jacob was over 100 years old.³ Seems old enough to know better. But old age does not always make us wise. Discipleship is a lifelong process, UNLESS we let ourselves plateau, UNLESS we quit growing in Christian maturity because we think we've got it all figured out. Being a godly woman or man demands a continual journey of humility and teachability. Otherwise, even in our old age, we can make mistakes that hurt others.

Perhaps some of us can relate to Jacob. I don't mean to be overly harsh or judgmental of him. It would be hypocritical of me to not show him grace. I am in need of grace myself as a parent. As parents, sometimes we blow it! Most of our mistakes aren't malicious. Most of them are unintentional blunders. And, we truly wish we could go back and erase the harm that's been done. One lesson Jacob doesn't teach us is our need to apologize for our parenting mistakes. And, once we've genuinely apologized to our families and done what we can to make things right, then all we can do is move on with a greater commitment to do better the next time.

² Note also that Joseph's uncle Esau had a jealous grudge against Jacob for stealing Esau's birthright. Genesis 27:41-42, "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is planning to avenge himself by killing you."

³ See chart on p. 31 of the 2011 NIV Study Bible.

Some of us may relate to Genesis 37:4, “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.” Perhaps we’ve hated a relative or we’ve felt like they hated us. It’s incredibly hard and painful to be hated by our own family; to receive only unkind words all the time. If this describes you, pay close attention to Joseph’s story. Joseph is young, and perhaps that is why he didn’t know better than to tell them about his dream, and they hate him all the more! And despite how poorly it went telling them the 1st dream, Joseph adds insult to injury and tells them about his 2nd dream as well. Let’s keep in mind Joseph was only 17, see Genesis 37:2. How many of us would admit saying/doing some rather foolish things when we were younger? Can I see a show of hands? Admitting our own mistakes helps us to be more graceful when other people make their mistakes. Please turn you Bible to Genesis 37:12.

2. Jealousy lead Joseph’s family to a bitter betrayal. Our story picks up from here. And it heads even further downhill. Genesis 37:12-36 says, “Now his brothers had gone to graze their father’s flocks near Shechem, and Israel [Jacob] said to Joseph, “As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.” “Very well,” [Joseph] replied...17 So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. 18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. 19 “Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. 20 “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” 21 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. 22 “Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don’t lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—24 and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it. 25 As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. 26 Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. 28 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. 29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. 30 He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?”

31 Then they got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.” 33 He recognized it and said, “It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.” 34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “No,” he said, “I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.” So his father wept for him. 36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.”

Jealousy lead Joseph’s family to a bitter betrayal. All the safety and kindness and protection that one might rightly expect from one’s family, one’s “own flesh and blood,” was ruined by jealousy. James 3:14 challenges us, “But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” We need to be honest about these feelings. We need to recognize and even admit out loud that envy/jealousy are there AND that they are wrong and can lead to terribly sinful attitudes and actions. Harboring these feelings in our heart is incredibly destructive. Hebrews 12:15 urges us, “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” These kinds of bitter attitudes need to be nipped in the bud. Otherwise, they grow into a poison that causes so much trouble. This can happen in our personal families, our church family, our workplaces, and anywhere else where humans get together. The sooner that we can be honest about it and repent of it, the sooner we can be free of it and reconcile.

This jealousy and bitter betrayal made things really rough for Joseph. By now, some of us may be asking ourselves...

3. Where was the LORD in all this? Please turn your Bible to Genesis 39. Our story continues in Genesis 39:1-4, “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.”

If you are at all cynical, you may be wondering what I’m wondering: Wait a minute, let’s go back to vv. 2-3 again, “**The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered**, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 When **his master saw that the LORD was with him...**” The LORD was with Joseph? Are you serious? You’ve got to be kidding me? Until this point in the story, God sure seems ABSENT to me! Where was God when Joseph was being hated on by his brothers, when those who should have been looking out for him, betrayed him? Where was God when they tore off his special robe, threw him in the cistern, and sat down to eat their dinner. I can certainly imagine Joseph at the bottom of that cistern asking, “God, where are you?”

When they pulled him back out of the cistern, can you imagine the relief Joseph was feeling? Oh, ok guys, very funny. You really had me going there...that is, until he realized the extent of their bitter betrayal; they were now selling him, their own brother, like a piece of property, for 20 shekels of silver. In fact, we learn later on in Genesis 42:21 that Joseph’s brothers say to one another, “we saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life.” At some point, Joseph must have wondered if God had betrayed him too...

But, as it turns out, God had NOT betrayed him, nor forgotten nor abandoned Joseph. Despite his desperate circumstances, the LORD was with him. We’ve probably all had low points in our lives where we’ve felt abandoned or betrayed by God in some way. But, God is faithful and He is fully aware of what we’re in the midst of. Jesus told His disciples, “in this world you will have trouble.” (Jn. 16:33) God doesn’t keep us from all trouble; that’s not how this life is designed to work. But God is with us through all our troubles. 2 Corinthians 1:4 reminds us that “[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

Somehow, incredibly, Joseph doesn’t end up with a debilitating martyr complex or feeling sorry for himself. Nor does he blame God. Rather than getting bitter, Joseph makes the best of it. You’ve probably heard the saying, “When life hands you lemons...make lemonade.” And that’s what Joseph does. He trusts God and makes the best out of a really, really hard situation. We may not always see or understand why God seems to be allowing so much pain and struggle in our life. We may not like his timing or how He goes about answering our prayers. But we can trust that He is with us in the midst of our troubles. It’s often much further down the road before we get even a glimpse of God’s grander purpose and provision for the things in this life. We’ll learn more about God’s bigger plan/purpose for Joseph when we get to the 3rd sermon in our series.

For today, let’s be encouraged that the LORD is always watching over His people. Ps. 121:1-3 encourages us, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber.” So, if you find yourself asking the question, “where is the LORD in all my troubles?” Just like Joseph, the answer is, “the LORD is with you.” He’s right there in the pit; right there beside you when your friends or family betray you. He’s with you when you are taken away into new and foreign places. **Our God is with us and He is for us!**

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