

“WHY THE WORLD HATES YOU” **(Genesis 37:1-11)**

Last week we finished our study of 2 Corinthians, and today we begin a new study on the life of Joseph from the book of Genesis. For the past couple of years I have been going through parts of Genesis, and then taking a break and studying a book from the New Testament. Now we are going back to Genesis and will finish it up with one of the most loved and compelling stories in the Bible. Joseph’s story touches on a number of topics common to the human condition such as family strife, the purpose and role of suffering, temptation, forgiveness, and all things working together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

Today as we are introduced to Joseph, we get a glimpse into his early years and the family dynamics that would play a pivotal role in his life story. His story begins with three incidents that spark a growing hatred against him by his brothers. As we look at Joseph’s life you can’t help but notice several similarities between Joseph and Jesus, and today we’ll see how the hatred of Joseph’s brothers foreshadows the intense hatred the leaders of Jesus’ people had for Him. It also pictures the hatred the world has for those who believe in and follow Jesus.

One of the most difficult things about being a Christian is knowing that those who do not share your faith and love for Jesus will misunderstand you and not accept you. You might be nice and loving and caring, but if your value system and way of life is different from those around you, some degree of persecution is sure to follow. 1 John 3:13 says... “Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.” In the Upper Room Jesus told His disciples... “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:19). What is it about being a Christian that provokes the wrath of the world?

Before we answer that question and zoom in on Joseph’s story, it’s helpful to take a 30,000-foot view of how his story fits into the overall story of the Bible. The Bible is the story of God’s promise to save the human race and restore the world. The story begins in Genesis where we see the creation of the world, the fall of mankind into sin, and then the promise of God to save the world through Abraham. Abraham has two sons – Ishmael and Isaac – and we see the promise being transferred to Isaac, the second born. Isaac has two sons – Esau and Jacob – and the promise is passed on to Jacob, also the second born. Jacob had twelve sons, and the rest of the Old Testament is about the twelve tribes of Israel, through whom God will bring His Son into the world to save the human race and restore all that is fallen and broken.

The story of Joseph moves this plot along by telling us what happens to the family of Jacob. If his family doesn’t make it to the end of Genesis – if they do not survive as a people – there is no Jesus and there is no salvation because this is the family God has chosen to fulfill His promises.

Joseph’s story begins in 37:1... “Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.” This continues the story going back to chapter 12 where God promised Jacob’s grandfather Abraham to give him a land and many descendants, and Jacob is living in the land promised to Abraham. Jacob, as you’ll recall, left the land for a number of years to flee the wrath of his brother Esau after stealing his birthright. In ancient culture the firstborn son received the family “birthright,” which included both material and spiritual blessings. When the patriarch of the family died, the firstborn son received a “double portion” of the estate, and he also was given the mantle of leadership and authority over the family. Jacob, the second-born, turned the tables on this tradition by tricking Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of stew.

While Jacob was away from the land, he married two sisters – Leah and Rachel. Leah gave birth to four sons, but Rachel – Jacob’s favorite wife – was barren. In order to have kids, Rachel gave her maidservant Bilhah as a surrogate mother who bore Jacob two sons. Not to be outdone, Leah gave Jacob her maidservant Zilpah, who gave Jacob two sons. Leah went on to have two more sons – and finally, after many years, Rachel gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin, but while giving birth to Benjamin, she died. So with this divided, competitive family you have all the makings of dysfunction, and it doesn’t take long for it to happen.

Verse 2a says... “These are the generations of Jacob.” The book of Genesis is organized around ten instances of this phrase: “these are the generations of”... So every time you read that we are coming to a new section of the story. This is the tenth and last time this phrase is used, pointing us to a new section of the book. While Joseph is the predominant character in the rest of Genesis, the final chapters of Genesis are really about Jacob and his descendants, and the fact that God fulfills his promises to Jacob.

As the narrative shifts to Joseph in verse 2 we see three reasons Joseph is hated, and the first reason is his **morality**. Verse 2b says... “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.” Jacob’s sons ran the family business, which was raising sheep, and shepherds often moved from place to place looking for pastureland. Joseph at this time was only seventeen, and the youngest of the brothers working out in the fields. He worked with the two sons of Bilhah – Dan and Naphtali – and the sons of Zilpah – Asher and Gad. It’s likely that these four sons bonded over the fact that they were born of servants, while Joseph was born of Jacob’s favored wife Rachel.

One day Joseph came home from the fields and reported to his father what his four brothers had been up to, and it wasn’t good. Some translations say it was an “evil” report. Joseph is often criticized for being a tattletale – the favorite child comes home and says, “Dad, guess what Dan and Naphtali and the boys have been up to,” and then takes great delight his brothers get punished. I don’t take it that way at all.

Later on in verse 12 we read that Jacob sends Joseph out to check up on his brothers, so it appears as though that’s what Joseph is doing here. He’s acting on behalf of his father. He sees his brothers do something – we’re not told what – but we already know these boys have a reputation – such as in chapter 34 where Simeon and Levi slaughter the Shechemites and loot their city of all its wealth. Then in chapter 35 Reuben – the eldest son – sleeps with Jacob’s wife Bilhah as a brazen act usurp the authority of his father. Needless to say, Joseph’s brothers had their character flaws. Joseph sees his brothers do something evil and has a decision to make: Do I try to keep on good terms with my brothers and say nothing, or do I obey and honor my father who is trusting me to tell him the truth? Whom do I seek to please?

One important trait we notice in Joseph’s life is that he had a tender conscience – when he saw evil he couldn’t overlook it – he couldn’t validate it – he couldn’t turn the other way – he had to speak up. Romans 12:9 says, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Proverbs 8:13 says, “To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.” If you love and fear the Lord, there are things you will hate – you will hate what God hates and you won’t look the other way. When Joseph reported what he saw, his brothers had animosity towards him.

Jesus was hated for the same reason. John 3:19-20 says, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.”

Jesus made it clear that you cannot remain neutral towards Him – you either love darkness or you love light, you either come to the light or resist the light, you’re either for Him or against Him. It’s interesting that Joseph’s brothers did evil out of the view of their father. When they were around dad they behaved one way, and when they were aware they acted another way. Character, they say, is who you are when no one is looking. When Jesus exposed sin, especially the sin of the Pharisees, rather than repent they reacted in anger and hated Jesus.

Likewise, when you as a Christian live a life of integrity like Joseph, when you have a tender conscience and are bothered by sin, the world will react. I had a friend growing up that didn’t seem terribly bothered by sin. In 7th grade he talked me into giving him my homework to copy, and as it turns out, he copied it word for word. The teacher smelled something fishy and called us into her office one at a time. My friend went first, and when he came out and I said, “How did it go, are we in trouble?” He said, “I just told her we didn’t do anything. Just tell her the same and we’ll be fine.” I went into her office fully intending to lie, but when the teacher looked at me over her glasses sitting low on her nose, I crumbled... “Yes, we did it.” My conscience wouldn’t allow me to lie. My friend wasn’t real happy, but I was able to sleep well that night.

Some years later I went golfing with this same friend and two other guys. They wanted to go early in the morning, before the owner showed up at the clubhouse, so we didn’t have to pay. I felt uneasy about it, but reluctantly went along and was sure the owner would drive in at any moment and we’d get busted. We got off the course before he came, but I felt guilty, while my friend loved getting away with it.

The moral of the story is: Don’t ever get used to sin – don’t ignore the conscience that God gave you as a warning light – be a person who does the right thing whether someone is looking or not.

The second reason Joseph was hated was his **identity**. Verses 3-5 say... “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.”

Talk about stoking the flames. Part of what makes families dysfunctional is when the same patterns are repeated generation after generation, and a big flaw in Jacob’s family – here he is called by the new name God gave him – a big flaw was favoritism. Jacob’s father Isaac favored Esau, and his mother Rebekah favored him. Favoritism led to a split in the family that was never completely healed, and if anyone should have avoided favoritism it was Jacob – but he repeats the same pattern.

Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son for a couple of reasons. One is that he was born to Jacob in his old age. His first ten sons were something of a disappointment – they were selfish, they were violent, and they were untrustworthy. Jacob didn’t help things by being a passive parent. But now he had a chance to start over with Joseph, who was much different than his brothers. Are any of you the youngest? I’m the youngest in my family, and parents tend to go easier on the youngest – maybe because they’re worn out by that time, or they are just more relaxed as they get older.

Joseph was also the favorite because he was the firstborn son of Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel. Rachel was the one he originally wanted to marry until his father-in-law tricked him into marrying Leah first. But his first love was always Rachel. Joseph was just a young boy when his mother died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. The absence of Rachel created a strong bond between Jacob and Joseph.

In verse 3 we read that Jacob made an ornate robe for Joseph, or as the KJV says, “a coat of many colors.” Everyone in that culture wore a robe – most went down to the knee, were short sleeved and plain. This kind of robe left the arms and legs free so that workers could work and move about. Joseph’s robe was long-sleeved, went down to his ankles, and was bright and colorful. It was not a working man’s robe, but a robe of royalty and of an exalted position. It also meant that Joseph, although he was the eleventh-born son, was chosen by his father to receive the family inheritance and be the leader of the family.

Joseph’s ten brothers, needless to say, are incensed that their father loved Joseph more than them – they hated Joseph so much that they wouldn’t even talk to him. My older brother and I did a skit one time called *Mom Always Like You Best*, which was a comedy routine performed by the Smothers Brothers. I played the part of Tommy Smothers, the younger brother who always felt his mom was preferential to his older brother Dick, who my brother imitated. In the skit, Tommy carries the wounds of his childhood into his adult years, and complains to his older brother how bad he had it, while Dick was the golden child.

It was a funny skit, but favoritism can be very damaging to children. It’s natural to feel a bond or connection to children that are like you and share your interests, but it’s important to understand how each child is wired so that you do not have unrealistic expectations of them. Comments like “Why can’t you be like your brother” plants a seed of bitterness in the heart of a child who doesn’t have the same personality, gifts, or interests. Each child needs to be loved and respected for who they are.

Be that as it may, the point of the story is that Joseph is hated by his brothers because of his identity as the appointed leader of the family. As the story develops, we find out that Joseph is given this role by God to save His chosen people from extinction.

Jesus was also hated for His identity as God’s Son. At the beginning of His ministry, after He was baptized, a voice from heaven said, “This is my son, whom I love; in Him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Jesus shared a unique relationship with His Father – while you and I become God’s children by adoption, Jesus was God’s Son by nature, sharing the same divine essence. On one occasion Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, and got all kinds of flak from the Jewish leaders. Jesus claimed that as God’s Son He had the authority to heal anytime He wanted to. The response was furious. John 5:18 says, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

As Christians we will also be hated for our identity with Christ. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Jesus says, “Don’t take it personally – they really hate me – and as you go out into the world and represent me, they will hate you.”

The world loves conformity. If you act like, look like, dress like, talk like, and believe like the world that lives apart from God, you are welcomed into the club. But if you live according to the values and standards of the Bible, if you refuse to bow down to accepted way of thinking – no matter how insane it is – you can expect severe backlash. Jesus says, “Like it or not, you’re different. You don’t belong to the world – I’ve chosen you to be separate from the world – and that’s why the world hates you.”

1 Peter 4:3-4 puts it this way, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” Can you relate to that? Some of you can. Once you stopped practicing your old sins, your former friends were surprised, and even shocked, at your radical change of lifestyle.

Warren Wiersbe says, “They don’t think it strange when people wreck their bodies, destroy their homes, and ruin their lives by running from one sin to another. But let a drunkard become sober, or an immoral person pure, and the family thinks he has lost his mind!” Not only do they not understand you, they feel judged by you. Your new lifestyle makes you feel guilty, and so they turn on you and heap abuse on you. Joseph’s coat of many colors made him stand out, and if you’re different, if you go against the flow of culture, you will be hated. But your theme song becomes, “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back... The world behind me, the cross before me... though none go with me, still I will follow... no turning back, no turning back.”

As Joseph’s story continues, we see the third reason he was hated was his **message**. Verses 5-8... “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: 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.”

Several times in Genesis God uses dreams and visions to reveal His plan to people – whether it was to Abraham, to King Ablimelech, to Laban, or to Joseph. God can still speak through dreams today, but now that we have the completed revelation of God’s Word, dreams are not as common or needed.

Through this dream God is giving Joseph and his family a vision for their future. The dream is not hard to interpret... Joseph is out harvesting grain in the field with his brothers, when his sheaf of grain stands up, while his brother’s sheaves gather around him and bow down to him. Though we don’t know it at the time, this is exactly what will happen some years down the road when Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt in search of grain and bow down to him. The dream shows how God will sovereignly elevate Joseph to save his family, but all Joseph’s brothers feel is more hatred... “You’re going to rule over us? Really? Do you know the pecking order in this family and do you realize that you’re the eleventh born out of twelve?” They don’t see that Joseph’s dream is from God.

In Joseph’s story there are three sets of dreams, with two dreams in each set. The reason, given in chapter 41, is to emphasize God’s determination to fulfill it – two dreams add extra confirmation. Joseph’s second dream comes in verse 9... “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.’” There’s no mistaking the meaning of this dream – the sun and the moon represent Joseph’s father and mother, and the eleven stars refer to the eleven brothers. Like the sheaves of grain, they all will bow down to Joseph, including his own father.

As you might suspect, this dream did not go over well either. Verses 10-11... “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.” Joseph’s brothers could not see that God anointed him to save their family, but Jacob kept an open mind.

Some commentators think that Joseph was arrogant and naïve to share these dreams with his brothers, but I don't think that's the point. The point is that Joseph received revelation from God and He communicated that revelation to his family – in other words, he spoke the words of God. Rather than receive Joseph's word as God's revelation, his brothers seethed at the idea that they would bow down to anyone, much less their little brother.

In coming to earth Jesus, being God, revealed God to the world and was sent by God to save the world. But like Joseph, Jesus was rejected and provoked the wrath of His Jewish brothers. At His trial Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, said, “Tell us is you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ ‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (Matthew 26:63b-64). Jesus says, “Right now I'm standing before you bound – you're in control – and when you put me to death, you'll think that will be the end of me – but you'll see my sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming in a cloud of glory from heaven to judge.” Philippians 2 says that one day every knee will bow before Jesus and every tongue confess that He is Lord.

After Jesus said this the high priest tore his clothes, and the rest of the Jewish leaders spit in his face and struck His with their fists. Like Joseph's brothers they refused to submit to God's revelation.

In the same way, as representatives of Jesus, the world will hate us for revealing God's message of salvation through Christ. Eleven of the twelve apostles died violent deaths for proclaiming that the only way to be saved is through Christ. The Apostle John didn't die a martyr's death, but he was put into a cauldron of boiling oil but survived. The first martyr in the book of Acts was Stephen who confronted the Jewish leaders for their blatant rejection of salvation in Christ. Rather than repent, Acts 7:57-58a says, “At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” Much of the world, when they hear the good news of the gospel, harden their hearts because they don't see their need for a Savior, and to be told they do – as everyone does – offends them. Rather than see us as caring deeply for their souls, they see us as threats and hate us for our message.

Three quick applications of this story before we go to communion...

Number one, don't provoke the world's hatred. Speak the truth in love. They may hate you anyway, but be kind and caring and be a good ambassador of Christ to the world.

Number two, don't avoid the world's hatred. You don't have to seek it or provoke it, but you should never try to hide your faith or be ashamed of your identity in Christ.

Number three, Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount that you should rejoice and be glad when people insult you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you because of me, for great is your reward in heaven. Just as Joseph's story has a happy ending, believers who are persecuted for the name of Christ will be richly rewarded for eternity and enter into the joy and happiness of their Savior.