

Revenge

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Genesis 37:12-24; 29-36

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Synopsis:

Joseph's arrogance and his brothers' hate ignite. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. God starts reconciliation down "in the mud, the blood, and the beer," as Johnny Cash so aptly sang in *A Boy Named Sue*. Paul echoes the same sentiment when he says, "it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died" (Romans 5:8).

I.

I'm here to offer you some comfort this morning. It has been said that "misery loves company," so, if you think your family is the only one to go through struggles, take this as some encouragement: no matter how dysfunctional you think your family is, it can't be much worse than Joseph's.

As Pastor Jeff demonstrated us last week, in the "soup" of Joseph's family, we find hatred, jealousy, revenge, prostitution, attempted murder, deception, adultery, incest, slavery, imprisonment, guilt, ransom, adultery, and about every disappointing human circumstance you can imagine.

But the good news is, at the end of all of this, God is able to take the mess of our lives and transform it into something good, for those who stand in Christ by faith.

Let's pray together: Sovereign God, you know our frame and our shame. You know the soup of our lives, and what makes us tick. Be with us today as we learn from your word, so that we might grow up into the love of Jesus Christ. Amen.

II.

Some friends loaned me a DVD this week that was very disturbing. I should have known it was going to be a little over the top when the first thing that came on my screen was a warning for "graphic bloody violence." But what could I do? My friends recommended it so highly I felt I just had to watch it.

If you know the story line of *Sweeny Todd*, you know that from the beginning to the end, it is one *long* descent into human darkness. The part of Judge Tarpin is

played by the same actor who plays “Snape” in the *Harry Potter* movies, and he’s one of the darkest villains I’ve ever seen.

He’s a voyeur, a sadist, a kidnapper, a child molester, an adulterer, and to top everything off, he uses his position of power as a judge to wreck havoc on other people’s lives. Before five minutes is up, he orders police to club and arrest an innocent barber for the sole purpose of bedding the barber’s wife. If there is anybody you’d want to kill and think you were doing the world a favor, trust me, it would be him. He’s one *hateful* man.

But as the movie unfolds, and you find yourself sucked into the Sweeny Todd’s twisted world of revenge, you discover that there is no sating that hunger, no quenching one’s thirst for vengeance. The more the barber kills, the farther away from justice he seems to get, until at the end of the movie he kills his own wife without even recognizing who she was, just at the moment they might be reunited in love. It’s a terribly tragic scene.

But that’s what revenge can do to you. It can consume your entire life without delivering what it promises. You start out thinking that the person who hurt you deserves it, but pretty soon you realize that the price you’re paying is the loss of your very soul.

III.

In our scripture reading this morning, for example, how is it that the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers turned into such cold-hearted revenge? I “get” that Joseph made a mistake by telling brothers his dreams of grandeur, especially in a culture where birth order matters so much, but please forgive me for not getting the depth of hatred and jealousy toward Joseph. He’s only a kid. He had some dreams. Get over it!

But that’s the thing; when someone hurts us, when someone wounds us deeply, it’s hard to get over. It’s not like we can just snap our fingers and erase what has been done. We brood, we hurt, we remember. But if we’re not careful, the pain we feel can cause us to do things that we’ll later regret.

IV.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be Joseph in that pit, to have been stripped naked and thrown into a deep hole in the middle of nowhere, and then to hear your brothers talking among themselves as they see a caravan of slave traders come riding along? You’re down in that pit, scared to death, naked, thirsty, not knowing what’s going to become of you.

And then you hear the words, “You know, killing him would make us feel guilty. Let’s sell him instead, because at least we’ll get some money for the trouble he’s caused us.

The problem with vengeance is that we don’t do it very well. No matter how “just” we think we’re being, we have a tendency to step over the line because our feelings get in the way, and our egos get in the way. No matter how hard we try, we seem to mess it up as individuals.

V.

Sometimes we even make the mistake of exacting revenge on a person who did not mean to harm us at all. Someone does something that hurts us, and we get all upset believing it’s about us, that their actions say something about our belovedness, or our competence, or our character, when really, all it might have to do with is that they were in a bad place that day.

The point is that often we don’t know why people say the things they do, or act the way they act. All we can be sure of is that at one time or another they are going to disappoint us; they are going to hurt us, they are going to misunderstand us, they are going to overlook us, we’re going to be falsely accused. If we’re going to have relationships with people of any depth at all, we’re bound to be hurt by them at one point or another. That’s the way life is on this side of heaven.

VI.

But what this text challenges us to do is to consider how we’re going to respond to the pain we feel.

Joseph’s brothers failed the test. They threw Joseph in a pit and then sold him into slavery. They didn’t have the perspective or faith or character to respond in any way that was remotely redemptive, or brought Joseph along in any significant way. How great it would have been for them to have a relationship with this talented kid brother, but instead, they lived in constant fear of him with guilty consciences nearly to their dying day.

VII.

We know when we’re seeking revenge the focus is on ourselves. The focus is not on doing the right thing, it’s not on helping the person who hurt us become a better person, and it’s not on God’s righteousness. Revenge is not an expression of faith in God to sustain us.

VIII.

But fortunately, the Joseph story does not end there. At the end of Genesis, we find Joseph serving as Pharaoh's most trusted executive with all the resources of Egypt under his command.

And with all of *that* going for him, the opportunity finally presents itself where he has the chance to exact retribution on his brothers for all the wrong they had done him. But he doesn't take it.

Instead, he tells his brothers in the last chapter of Genesis, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."

That's faith folks. *That's* true strength. When you can keep your eyes focused on God's redemptive plan, his good plan for you, and his good plan for the world, even in the midst of being personally attacked or mistreated, *that's* faith.

What a perspective it would be if we understood everything that happens to us as something God will work out in his own way, in his own time. There's some plan for our future that we can be confident about because we know the mess of our life will be worked out in God's sovereign care.

IX.

Sometimes we can't "get over" the hurt that someone has caused us, but we *CAN* "get off of it."

I'm sure Joseph never "got over" the fact that his brothers were considering leaving him for dead in the middle of the desert, but somehow, in trusting and serving God through many setbacks, he became the sort of person who could rise above their attempts to hurt him. He had the chance to take justice in his own hands, but he didn't do it. He left it to God to deal with his brothers.

X.

At the center of human history, there stands a symbol for God's love. It is a symbol represented in as many different ways as there are cultures on earth; in fact, as many ways as there are artists to render it. It is the symbol of the cross.

There's a reason for that. Instead of taking revenge for our rebellion and disobedience, God offered us forgiveness in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul says it

this way, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). And then Peter writes, “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). Humanity meant the cross for harm, but God used it for good.

XI.

Don’t be fooled; there are all sorts of minor ways we exact revenge on people. We withdraw our participation, we pout, we say critical things, we withhold our resources from each other when we don’t get our way.

We may not slit each other’s throats like Sweeny Todd did, or sell our brother into slavery like Joseph’s brothers did, but there are other ways we punish people for things they have done to hurt us.

That’s not strength; that’s weakness.

When we think about revenge, we think about grand gestures, but the sad truth is we’re tempted by revenge in far more subtle ways every day of our lives.

Whenever we let our pain, or hatred, or judgment, or fear, cause us to withdraw our charity toward others, we exact a strange and subtle form of revenge that tarnishes the gospel every bit as much as the actions that make the movies.

While we were building, a home for a family in Mexico a couple week’s ago, our theme verse was 1 John 3:16. It went like this, “¹⁶We know love by this, that Christ laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

XII.

You might say, “That doesn’t sound like too much fun, laying down our lives for others,” but here’s the pay off. You get a deeper relationship with the living God. You don’t have to walk on shaky ground any more. Your foundation is no longer the sifting sands or your ego, or your feelings, or self-esteem, or even of your preferences. You get to live for something much bigger and grander than that. You get the company of the living Lord. Because believe me, he’s been through everything that you might go through, and he’s living to give you strength this very day.

The pay off is your integrity with God. That’s your pay off. You can live with a clear conscience—because in Him, God has forgiven you. You don’t have to go to your grave with your misdeeds on your conscience, not your anger, not your guilt,

not your shame; you can stay in integrity with yourself and your God. And that's your reward.

The cross is the ultimate testimony to God's power to uphold you. The power over every evil that humanity can dish out is something you can live in right now. It's not something that is only for the future, it's something for the present, and it's good news for the world.

Live in that strength today. Live in that peace today, my friends. His resurrection power is worth any sacrifice you might have to make for it. Amen.

