Envy: From Status Anxiety to Belovedness
By Harriette Mostert

Pastor and writer Max Lucado wrote a children's book that features wooden people.[1] Each wooden person is one of a kind and made by a wood carver Eli. The wooden people live together in a village down the hill from the wood carver's cottage, but they've forgotten all about their maker. What they do all day is give each other either gold stars or grey dots. Gold stars are coveted and come from achievements, beauty, or having lots of other gold stars. Grey dots are marks of shame for perceived faults, ugliness, or having lots of other grey dots.

It's not hard to see that this author is really talking about you and me. We live in a world where the uniqueness of each human being, made in the image of God, is often used for sorting and then ranking. Ranking can be subtle or obvious, and it comes in endless categories: height, birth order, athletic skill, skin colour, number of grandchildren, size of one's dwelling, gender, and mobility, just to name a few.

A little boy says, "My dad is bigger than your dad," as if wanting a gold star. Siblings pay attention to who gets a bigger serving of potato chips at snack time. Young hockey players keep track of their goals and assists relative to their teammates and opponents. Neighbours notice who's making upgrades to their homes; and feeling "less than," they take on a grey dot. Comparison heightens our status anxiety. It is fuel for envy.

What exactly is envy? Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas described envy as "sorrow at another's good fortune."[2]

The backstory of the word envy has something to do with vision, meaning literally "to see into" in Latin. It comes by a twisting of the sense of sight: we see something that is not in our grasp, and it makes us malicious.

Envy is deadly because it disconnects us from community by focusing on what the self does not have. The beautiful community of the family is torn apart when siblings become rivals. The beautiful community of the workplace turns toxic when coworkers see each other as competitors instead of partners. The beautiful community of a city crumbles when "I want what you have" becomes the dominant attitude of its citizens. And without community or friendship, humans become bitter and mean to each other.

When you start actively looking for envy in Bible stories, you find it as early as the account of Cain and Abel. Move to the gospels, and Pontius Pilate is said to know

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[1] Max Lucado, *You Are Special,* Crossway Books, 1997.
[2] Quoted in Thomas Skeats, "God's Generosity", *Dominican Friars: England & Wales, Scotland,* September 2014

that the chief priests handed Jesus over to be killed “out of envy”. When the Apostle Paul was in prison, he referred to some men preaching Christ “out of rivalry and envy…supposing that they can stir up trouble for [him] while [he is] in chains” (Philippians 1:17).

For today we will take a closer look at the story of Joseph and his brothers. Although we’ll be reading from Genesis 37:1-20, I will make reference to other parts of this account throughout the message.

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

**2** 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.

**3** 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[a] robe for him. **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.

**5** Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. **6** 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.

**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.”

**10** 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?” **11** His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

**12** Now his brothers had gone to graze their father’s flocks near Shechem, **13** and Israel 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,” he replied.

**14** So he said to him, “Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.” Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, **15** a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, “What are you looking for?”

**16** He replied, “I’m looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?”

**17** “They have moved on from here,” the man answered. “I heard them say, ‘Let’s go to Dothan.’”

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.”

This is the word of the Lord…Thanks be to God.

We will look at the story of Joseph under three headings: the Ingredients of Envy, the Deadliness of Envy, and the Antidote for Envy

**The Ingredients of Envy**

To set the context for the story of Joseph, we are in the fourth generation of Abraham’s family line. Abraham and Sarah and their descendents are a specially chosen household, which has received precious promises from God Almighty. They will become a great nation and through them, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This key promise is passed down from parent to child as well as by direct revelation to each patriarch: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This growing family is dearly loved by God despite its many dysfunctions. Through them, centuries later, our Saviour was born so that even we might be among the nations blessed with hope and salvation.

Jacob’s household is a site of sideways glances starting with his wives. Belonging and love are given according to ranking and competition. Jacob loves his wife, Rachel, a gold star. Through a trick of his employer and now father-in-law, he’s also forced to marry her sister, Leah, who is full of grey dots.

Leah, Rachel and their two female servants vie for acceptance by having sons for Jacob. In this contest, Leah gets 6, Bilhah gets 2 for Rachel, Zilpah adds 2 to Leah’s tally and Rachel gets 2 of her own, but nobody wins. In fact, Rachel dies in childbirth. This rivalry is the first ingredient of envy.

The group of 12 brothers and half-brothers carry on the rivalries as they grow up. Rights of the firstborn matter, and now Jacob actively feeds the conflict by giving Joseph a special, ornate robe, a gold star of sorts. It sets Joseph above the other brothers despite his age as the second youngest.

We should not imagine that Jacob's other sons have not been given coats by their father. This robe is an additional one, and it signals to the brothers that Jacob intends to make Joseph receive the "double-portion", the inheritance of the firstborn even though it rightfully belongs to Leah's son, Reuben.[3] Notice how the brothers "see" the way their father loved Joseph more than them. It's enough to add hatred to the mixture.

Little brother Joseph is 17 years old when he gives a grey dot- report about four of his half-brothers. Then he announces to most of the family a pair of gold star dreams. You would think he would know better than to elevate himself in this way, especially in a culture that was not focused on the individual but on the wellbeing of the group or tribe. The brothers see him as ambitious and even more of a threat. They distance themselves from him by calling him "that dreamer," making the deadly brew complete.

**The Deadliness of Envy**

Envy is about to be consumed by this family, and then envy will consume them. The ten brothers see their chance as Joseph gets closer on his inspection visit in Dothan. They scheme together to put a stop to Joseph's dreams, centring on stripping him of the robe, the symbol of his higher rank. Putting him in a deep pit was just the beginning. They were bent on killing him! Yet by a providential nudge to sell him to a band of merchants travelling by, Joseph's life is spared.

However, everything about the removal of Joseph from Canaan is a kind of death. A goat is killed to taint Joseph's robe and becomes part of the cover up. Jacob is misled and lives for 22 years certain that his son was killed by a wild beast. His grief is intense and is coupled with the loss of his wife Rachel. No doubt, Jacob is devastated almost beyond recovery.

Likewise, young Benjamin would have only foggy memories of his biological brother. For him, there is no conception of ever seeing Joseph again.

And the ten half-brothers must have imagined that Joseph would sooner or later die as a mistreated and unvalued slave of brutal Egyptians. For ten people to hold a conspiratorial lie would do something terrible to their psyches. The deadly sin consumed them. As the writer of Proverbs alerts us: "envy rots the bones."

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[3] BEMA Discipleship Podcast, "Episode 15: Into the Pit," (19 January 2017).

Meanwhile, Joseph is in real danger. Vulnerable with no community to protect him, he is destined to become a lowly slave. The early hearers of this saga may have torn their own clothes at this point, to think of this great grandson of Father Abraham being cast aside from his tribal group.

And what have the brothers gained? Their desire to be treasured by their father is still elusive. Can Reuben use launderer's soap to clean Joseph's robe and wear it proudly as the rightful firstborn? Can any of them spend their share of the 20 shekels of silver without arousing suspicion? Can they even look their father in the eye? This may explain why Judah moves away from the others in the next chapter. He may be trying to hide his grey dots and start anew.

Who now becomes the object of Jacob's affection? Rachel's other son, Benjamin. The ten are broken and finally resigned to not being loved.

**The Antidote for Envy**

Joseph himself would have been tempted to envy while in Egypt. Imagining his brothers, his father, their flocks and tents, the stories by the fire, and all the things he will never see again, a longing and resentment was bound to have arisen in his heart. And yet God's abiding presence with Joseph enables him to rise above envy and wrath.

Thirteen years later, at age 30, Joseph is lifted to a position of honour within Egypt. He is put in charge of managing all of Egypt's wheat harvests for seven years of plenty, and then rationing it when the years of famine begin. He is enabled to have a family of his own, and the name of his first son Manasseh refers to being able to forget all his troubles and his father's household in Canaan.

During the second year of famine, however, Joseph recognizes 10 men from Canaan desperate for food. After treating them with suspicion, and taking Simeon as a hostage, he hears the brothers confess among themselves, "Surely, we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we wouldn't listen; that's why this distress has come upon us" (Genesis 42:21). Their misdeed from over 20 years before was still close to the surface.

Joseph must have wondered all these years how Benjamin would fare among these envious and cruel brothers, so he finds a way to see his blood brother with his own eyes. And remarkably, the older brothers demonstrate special care for their little half-brother in multiple ways: they make vows to their father to safeguard him, they accept that their father delights in him, and they offer to be held as slaves so that Benjamin can return to their father, Jacob. The brothers have now chosen a better way of being a family.

Joseph's perspective on this turn of events is rooted in a covenant God. Still, it shocks and surprises the brothers when he eventually reveals his identity to them. He has to reassure them again and again that he has forgiven them. He states that God's plan was being worked out for their rescue, despite their envious intentions. We see a renewal of the promise to Abraham and a vision of returning to Canaan one day in the far future.

Joseph seems to have heard a voice, a voice described by Henri Nouwen:

> "Long before your father and mother, your brothers and sisters, your teachers, your church, or any people touched you in a loving as well as in a wounding way—long before you were rejected by some person or praised by somebody else—that voice has been there always. 'I have loved you with an everlasting love.' That love [was] there before you were born and will be there after you die."[4]

Unlike the brothers in our story, our Heavenly Father does not operate the way their father Jacob does. We don't have to compete or achieve to be treasured by the Heavenly Father. Through the grace and mercy of Jesus, our Father comes to us when we consume and are consumed by envy's deadly fruit. He comes to assure us that we are loved, that we matter to Him, and that the Lord has our best interest at heart.

I remember hearing Pastor Adrian Van Giessen, who went to be with the Lord 9 years ago, say with gusto and conviction, "God is crazy about you." He was right! Jesus accepted years of shame, suffering, humiliation, false accusations, pain and ultimately the death penalty because of how much he LOVES you and me. We don't have to earn gold stars or avoid grey dots. We don't have to be better, wiser, slimmer, or more righteous to be approved. Our Lord loves you because he made you, and he has redeemed you. You are his beloved.

In the story of the wooden people, two of them manage to break free from the gold star and grey dot cycle by reconnecting with their maker. They go to Eli's workshop each day and learn how much he treasures them. They discover that by focusing on what the woodcarver thinks of them more than what other wooden people think of them, the stars and dots no longer stick.

In the same way, when we have the deep rooted assurance of God's love in Christ, we can stop seeing others as rivals for attention or affection or status. The deadly sin of envy does not have to seduce us. The joys and achievements of another can become our joy, because as Elizabeth Oldfield shares in her book *Fully Alive,* being "fully happy for another…is surely one of those virtues which is straightforwardly

[4] Henri Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry", n.d.

pleasurable. Shared joy connects us."[5] And surely, this connection that we were designed to long for can also be found among the family of faith, despite our many dysfunctions.

Let's use the words of paragraph 34 of the Contemporary Testimony, to say together some things we know and believe about God's New People:

In our world,
Where many journey alone,
Nameless in the bustling crowd,
Satan and his evil forces
Seek whom they may scatter and isolate;
but God, by his gracious choosing in Christ,
Gathers a new community
All are welcome:
The homeless come home,
The broken find healing,
The sinner makes a new start,
The despised are esteemed,
The least are honoured
And the last are first.
Here the Spirit guides
And grace abounds.[6]

[5] Elizabeth Oldfield, *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times,* 2024, p. 125
[6] *Contemporary Testimony*, Christian Reformed Church of North America, 2nd edition, 2008, paragraph 34.