

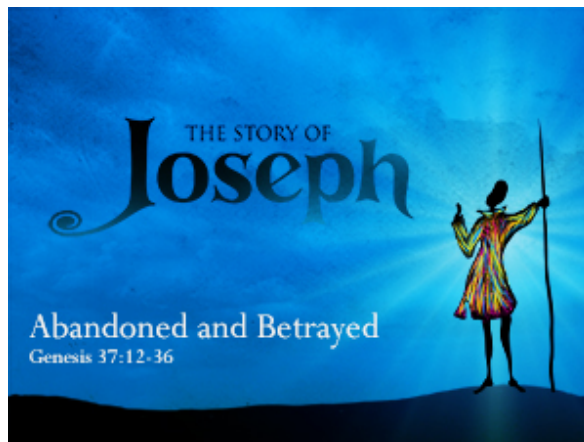
# ABANDONED AND BETRAYED

15th April, 2018

Sermon Series: The Story of Joseph

Readings: Genesis 37:31-36; Romans 3:9-18

Here's a question for you... "Which kind of monster are you?" There we go. In one sentence I've insulted everyone in the room! So, please bear with me while I explain. This morning's Bible passage shows us the chaos of Joseph's family coming to a head. Jealousy and hatred that's been simmering boils over – even explodes - and a great evil is unleashed. And, it'd be all too easy to conclude that Joseph's brothers were monsters - just plain evil - and they should be done away with. Yet, the Bible challenges our dismissal. There's more to it. Listen to Romans 3:9 says...



What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. Roman 3:9

What I'm asking is this: are we any better than Joseph's brothers? Deep down - are we? If we were in their exact same situation would we have behaved better? You could well have, and good on you. But, to help explore what's going on with these brothers - and us - we'll look at two well known, classic monsters and see which we're closer too.

Firstly, are you are you more like a Jekyll and Hyde monster. In this classic horror tale Dr Jekyll wrestles with the good and evil within himself. He wants to do good but there's a part of him that doesn't! So, in his lab he cooks up a potion in an attempt to mask the evil within. However, when he takes the potion, for a short time, he's transformed into a cruel, remorseless, evil Mr Hyde. When he's himself again Jekyll finds himself drawn to this evil character. He thinks by taking the potion now and again he can enjoy being the wicked Mr Hyde while he as the respectable, well-loved Dr Jekyll remains untarnished. However, as he indulges his Mr Hyde this evil side grows more and more powerful until it takes over the good Dr Jekyll, even without the potion.

This then is the first monster. Dr Jekyll who battles good and evil within.

Or are you more like Frankenstein? In Mary Shelly's novel Dr Victor Frankenstein create life in his lab. Labouring for two years he creates a creature out of materials sourced from "the dissecting room and slaughterhouse". However, when he

succeeds, Victor is terrified of his creation and runs away while the monster escapes. Now, forget what you've seen in movie adaptations, Mary Shelly's view of the monster was that he was created good but his environment made him to go bad. That because he looked like a monster he was treated cruelly, shunned, driven away. Later the monster tells his creator...

"I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous"

So unlike Dr Jekyll, who battled good and evil within, Frankenstein battled evil on the outside. Created with an innocent heart his monstrous actions were the result of a being in bad world. So, which monster do you think you're more like?

With this in mind, let's pick up Joseph's story as things get ugly and monstrous deeds occur. Let's dive in at 37:12

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem. Genesis 37:12

Now, this is an innocent sounding verse, isn't it? Far from it. Shechem has history. Dark history. Monstrous deeds occurred in Shechem (Genesis 34).

For a few years before Jacob with his family was living in this place. Tragically Dinah, Jacob's only daughter, was raped. It was by the son of the local ruler, the most important and powerful man in the area. The son was so besotted with Dinah he insisted his father get Dinah as his wife. Now, when Dinah's brothers found out they wanted vengeance - but twelve brothers against the whole town weren't good odds. So, when the father came to negotiate marriage the brothers insisted only if all the men in the town were circumcised. This was agreed but while the men were still recovering the brothers took up to their swords and put townsmen to the death. Goodness me! What sort of Monsters are these lads?

Jacob, unaware of the plot, was appalled when he found out. The whole family was forced to leave Shechem before retribution fell on them. Now, some years later the brothers are shepherding in same area. Go figure! I suppose there's irony in one evil deed being perpetuated in the same place as another. Verse 18

But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. Genesis 37:18

A couple of things here. How did they recognise Joseph from a distance? He was a long way off. No one had binoculars. It could have been anyone? How did they know it was their brother? The coat. Joseph had his special "nah, nah, nah, nah" coat. Verse 19

“Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “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. Genesis 37:19–20

“Dreamer” of course refers to the two dreams where the brothers bowed down to Joseph. This seems to be the final straw and their hatred spills over for this favoured brother of theirs.

But, as we’re expecting the worse - a lifeline.

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. Genesis 37:21

Reuben suggests they throw him in a cistern, a sort of well, so he could later rescue his brother. Now who’s Reuben. He’s the oldest brother, the firstborn and in the culture of the day he should be the favoured son. In spite of this it looks as if he’s doing the right thing, but it’s hard to tell with Reuben. He’s already in trouble himself. He’s blotted his copybook. He’s lost the family’s respect. How? He’d slept with one of his stepmothers, and his Dad, Jacob, found out. And when he did it wasn’t pretty. This came back to haunt Reuben again and again. Goodness me what sort of monster is Reuben? - he slept with his step mum but also wants to save his brother.

Let’s see how Joseph fares.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing— and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. As they sat down to eat their meal...Genesis 37:23–24

How callous, how uncaring, how mean - after stripping Joseph of his special clothes they throw him into a well, fortunately with little water. Then calm-as-you-like they sit down, eat, and ignore the cries of their young brother. Many years later the brothers refer back to this time saying...

We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen. Genesis 42:21

And as they eat, in the distance they see movement again. This time it’s a caravan of merchants and traders. As they approach Judah has an idea.

Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 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. Genesis 37:26–27

Goodness me! What kind of monsters are they? Soon the deal is done, money changes hands, Joseph is put in chains and only one thing remains... What will they tell their father?

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces. Genesis 37:31–33

And there's great irony with all this. For when Jacob was a young man he deceived his father with a goat and clothes. Do you remember how? To get his blind father's blessing he served freshly prepared goat while wearing his older brother's clothes. Yes, with a goat and clothes Jacob deceived his father and no good came of it. Now his sons are fooling him with a goat and clothes and no good will come of this.

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him. Genesis 37:34–35

Goodness me! What kind of monsters are these brothers. Decade after decade Jacob mourned for Joseph. Any time the brothers could have put their father out of his misery. They could have brought some hope that Joseph was still alive. But no. They let their father suffer and suffer and suffer.

But God has a plan. A wonderful plan. A glorious plan. A plan much bigger than this family. A plan Joseph as he was dragged off in chains, couldn't see. A plan his brothers couldn't see it. A plan Jacob, whose heart was torn into a thousand pieces couldn't see. But God could. Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

So where is this plan, this hope this future? And the first word of this final verse points to this plan.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Genesis 37:36

“Meanwhile”. And in this “meanwhile” God is working to prosper and not harm. The details will unfold next week but for now this meanwhile shows us that God is in control and his plan will come about.

So how are we to make sense of this? What’s our take home and where is Christ in this mess?

The first take home involves answering, “Which monster are you?” Remember Jekyll and Hyde, battling of good and evil within. Or Frankenstein, having an innocent heart and battling evil without. Now, this is such a crucial question because the answer goes to core of what it means to be human. For, if we’re like Frankenstein then any bad person can be changed into a good person by changing their environment. By improving health, removing poverty, gaining better education. Combined with counselling and love, bad people like these brothers can be made good. That’s the Frankenstein model. However, if where a Jekyll and Hyde then changing the environment will make a positive difference but won’t resolve the core dominance of evil over good.

So which is it? Which monster are we most like?... The Bible clearly tells us we’re Jekyll and Hyde. I mean look at Rueben. One minute stopping his brothers from murdering Joseph but earlier having slept with his step-mother. On the one hand wanting to rescue Joseph but on the other prepared to see his father in misery, mourning for Joseph, day after day, for years - when a few words would but his father at ease. Very much a Jekyll and Hyde.

Yes, for the Bible tells us

Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. Romans 3:9

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:23

And our fate will be the same as the fictional Jekyll and Hyde... if we don’t turn to Christ. Hyde eventually took over Jekyll and both died. And the harsh reality is without Christ taking over us, our Hyde will win out in us. You see, because of the cross, sin is crushed. Its hold over us is mortally wounded. Satan’s domination is ended. Mr Hyde is dead and we are set free. Praise the Lord! What wonderful news. What a glorious hope. This then is our first take home. We’re all like Jekyll and Hyde, without hope, unless we look to, and keep looking to Jesus, as Saviour and Lord.

Now, what's the second take home. Well, we all have a "meanwhile". Each one of us sitting here, including myself, has a "meanwhile". What do I mean by this? Remember, after Joseph is disposed of and the brothers deceive their father the Bible tells us, "Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt." God's plan for good continues. And likewise, each of us has a meanwhile.

For, no matter how chaotic our situation, no matter how desperate your family, or finances, or health, God has a "meanwhile" for us. No matter how lonely, how depressed, how frightened. No matter how many unanswered prayers lay scattered on the floor and discouragements weigh us down or blind alley's we've retraced - God has a meanwhile for us. Like Joseph, his brothers and father - none of them could see God's "meanwhile" at the time. We also often cannot see his plan "to prosper you and not harm" us, but he can. And so we hope with a hope that cannot be shaken as we look to God with eyes of faith. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Jesus, who comes to us via the cross - sharing our pain, bearing our pain, absorbing our pain.

For like Joseph, Christ was sent to his brothers by a father who cared - a Heavenly Father. Yet, his brothers - the Jews - did not receive Jesus. Indeed The Bible tells us

(Jesus) was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. John 1:10-11

Not only did they not receive Jesus, but they rejected this loved and favoured son. They hated Christ being spiteful even in his death. While the brothers callously ignored Joseph's cries from the pit, those around the cross callously ignored Jesus' cry, "My God why have you forsaken me". But this cry was different - completely different - than Joseph's. For while Joseph pleaded for his life - Jesus did not. No, he's set his face to obey his Father even to the cross. No, his cry was from a heart separated from his Father as Christ became sin that we might become children of God.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21

Yes, as Christ carried the weight of humanity's sin, rebellion and hate, God turned his back on his only Son. The soldiers gambled and the onlookers mocked and then all fell silent. And Jesus cried, "It is finished" giving up his last breath.

And this cry "It is finished" is God's "meanwhile". For "meanwhile" as the temple curtain split in two and the earth quaked and the thunder rumbled, God's plan is fulfilled. Satan is vanquished, disarmed and dethroned. Sin's iron grip is loosened and the darkness of the grave gives way to God's glorious light. For on that first

Easter Sunday the heavens and earth - yes, every star in the night sky, every angel before the heavenly throne and every demon in the pit of hell, saw the tomb empty and Christ alive

This is the great “meanwhile”. The outworking of God’s great and wonderful plan. The plan that Joseph finally saw towards the end of his life when, reconciled to his brothers, he said...

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. Genesis 50:20

Today, God calls each of us to be part of his plan – his “meanwhile”.