

The Pit of Envy

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- [0 : 0 0] So, the other night, I got an update from a friend that I haven't heard anything from in a while, an old friend, and turns out he and his family are celebrating a major opportunity that has come into life for their... come into their lives as a family.
- It's going to be a fantastic experience for them. And I read this update, and I really wanted to be happy for him because I really like this guy, and I really wanted to feel happy, but I felt something actually very different.
- As I read the details of the update, I felt my stomach start to turn sour, and I felt this kind of tightness in my chest, and I realized that I kind of stopped breathing for probably several seconds, and all of... at once, all of the, you know, satisfaction and contentment that I normally feel in my life just sort of evaporated.
- You know, that's how quickly envy can set in. I felt like I was just kind of going along, feeling pretty good about things, and then envy blindsided me.
- It's like getting jumped from a dark alley. And all at once, all of that contentment was gone. And I struggled to feel happy for this friend that I really care about.
- [1 : 1 9] And I don't know if that's ever happened to you. Probably has. I think envy is something that happens to everybody if you live long enough, and many of us struggle with it, especially now in the age of social media.
- This is what we're going to be talking about this morning. And we're going to be talking about envy as a part of a series that we've been doing all summer in Psalm 106. We read a snippet of that earlier.
- Psalm 106 was written down during Israel's time of exile in Babylon. And they wrote this psalm as a song that recounts all of the formative experiences that Israel faced during their time wandering in the wilderness after being set free from slavery in Egypt.
- And you say, well, why would somebody write a song to remember all of these formative experiences? And it's because they wanted to remember them and to teach them to their children.
- This is what life is like in the wilderness. And, you know, the story of Israel is really, if you understand the Bible and kind of how to read the story, it's really a microcosm of the world.
- [2 : 3 0] The story of Israel is really the story of the world. It's the story of human beings in the world in the sense that we're all wandering in the wilderness. All human beings, according to Scripture, are spiritually homeless.
- We're like pilgrims searching for home. And the reason is because we were made to live with God. That's our home, and yet that relationship has been broken.
- And so, we're all like pilgrims trying to find our way home. And there are certain challenges that are kind of like marks of wilderness life. There are symptoms that remind us that we are spiritually homeless and that this isn't our home and that we're merely pilgrims passing through.

And so, Psalm 106 recounts these symptoms of spiritual homelessness. These are the things you're going to face on the road as pilgrims. And so, a couple of weeks ago, we looked at unbelief as one of the challenges of wilderness life.

Last week, Jeff preached on discontent, and that's a marker of life in the wilderness. And this week, we're going to look at envy. And Psalm 106, verses 16 through 18, they refer to an incident in the wilderness that we read about in...we just heard read a moment ago in Numbers chapter 16.

[3 : 52] Now, there's a lot going on in Numbers 16, and we don't have time to get into all of it. We're really going to focus on this theme of envy. And we're going to see a couple of things. We're going to see the problem of envy, and then we're going to see the way out of envy.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and I thank You that we get to come around Your Word every week together as a family. And we thank You that we don't do that alone, that You're here with us.

We pray that Your Holy Spirit would illuminate Your Word, that these words would become flesh. Lord, we're here to do more than just hear human wisdom or insights.

We're here to encounter the living Word, Jesus Christ. And I pray that through Your Word now, and then in a little while through the sacrament of the Eucharist, that in both ways, Lord, we would encounter and receive Christ and be changed by Him.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So, first of all, we're going to look at the problem of envy. Numbers 16 begins with a dramatic public confrontation.

[4 : 55] By the way, I think this is the most dramatic chapter in Numbers, which, believe it or not, is a fairly dramatic book. It doesn't sound like it, but it's a fairly dramatic book. Actually, the original, the Hebrew title for Numbers is not Numbers, it's in the wilderness.

So, a lot of Numbers is about life in the wilderness. So, we begin with a very dramatic public confrontation. Four men, we have Korah, we have Dathan, we have Abiram, and we have On.

They recruit 250 other men. These are chiefs. These are well-known, well-respected influencers from among the community. And they all come together to publicly confront Moses and Aaron.

You say, well, what's the issue? Verse 3, you have gone too far, they say to Moses, for all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them.

Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord? So, it sounds like a theological critique. It sounds like they are legitimate in their complaint.

[5 : 55] They're challenging the legitimacy of Moses as their leader. They're saying, who do you think you are? How dare you exalt yourself above the rest of us as though you're somehow superior?

Now, the truth is, if you understand the context, Moses has done nothing wrong. God Himself had appointed Moses to this position, not Moses. And if you know anything about how that went down, Moses originally didn't want the job.

He was resistant, and God had to say, well, okay, we'll send Aaron along to help you. Does that make it better? And Moses said, okay, I'll do it. So, what's the real issue here?

Moses is not exalting himself. He's just responding to God's call. And Psalm 106 gives us insight into the real issue here. It seems like a legitimate critique, but in fact, the real issue is envy.

It's envy. Now, envy means coveting something that somebody else has and wanting it for yourself. So, in this case, Korah and his associates, they covet the job that Moses and Aaron have in the congregation.

[7 : 08] They covet that job. They covet the status that seems to come with it. Now, here's the thing we need to understand. Korah already has a great job. He already has a respectable job.

We hear Moses refer to this in verses 8 through 10. Korah was a descendant of Levi, and all of Levi's descendants had been given special roles in the tabernacle. He had already been set apart and given a very important role, but that wasn't enough.

All Korah can think about is the job that Moses has, the job that Aaron has, which seems in his mind to be more important, higher status.

That's what he wants for himself. And, you know, it's easy to read this and to kind of write Korah and these guys off as bad guys. But I think that if we're honest, probably most of us can identify with this on some level.

You know, this is like finding out that someone from your grad school program who finished the same year you did has landed a much more prestigious position than you.

[8 : 15] You know, you have a great job at a Fortune 500 company, and you find out that they're a VP at a Fortune 100 company. And it just kind of burns you up because you've got the same MBA at the same time.

It's like struggling to get pregnant and then watching people around you get pregnant seemingly without even trying. You have friends on their third kid, their fourth kid, and you're still trying to have your first.

It's like swiping through online dating profiles and then switching over to Instagram and seeing the latest batch of wedding photos from one of your friends who got married in Bora Bora. It just burns you up, right?

And we all know how it feels when envy sets in. Proverbs 14.30 says, envy makes the bones rot. And I think there's a...it's going to be hard to find a more accurate description of how envy feels on the inside.

It feels like you're rotting. It feels like your bones are rotting. So then we need to ask ourselves, what's going on here? You know, why can't we simply love and be happy for and celebrate with our friends?

[9 : 21] When good things happen in their lives, why is it so hard to do that? And you know, in Shakespeare's Othello, Iago says of Cassio, he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.

He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly. You know, I think that really shows us how envy works. Someone else has something in their life, something that I believe I should have, and by having it, simply by having it, they expose my inadequacy for not having it.

Right? Simply by having that really great job or that really nice big house, they expose the fact that I don't. They expose my inadequacy.

They expose my lack of that thing. And the thing is, we don't tend to envy people for having things that we don't really care about.

You know, growing up, I never really envied people who are good at shuffleboard because I never really cared about being good at shuffleboard. What I wanted for a long time when I was growing up, I really wanted to be in a band.

[10 : 38] I wanted to be in like a rock band. And that was kind of one of my core dreams as a kid. But no matter how hard I tried, I was just honestly never really that good.

My younger brother is just a naturally talented musician. He can just pick up instruments and play them, and he has a fantastic singing voice.

So when I would play and sing for people, I would get the polite clap. When he would play and sing for people, he would get the genuine applause. And I knew deep down that no matter how hard I tried, I would never be as good as my brother.

And so when he would play and when he would sing and when everybody else would say, isn't he so great? Isn't he so talented? It would just burn me up inside. I couldn't ever really be happy for him.

I couldn't really ever clap wholeheartedly because that's what I wanted. That's what I craved as a part of my own identity. So this is what envy does.

[11 : 41] It sets in when somebody has something that we want, that we think we need, that we think we lack. And so this is how Korah feels. Every time Korah sees Moses, every time Korah sees Aaron, and everybody else is kind of looking around saying, hey, I love those guys.

They're doing such a good job. Korah, it burns him up. And, you know, the rabbinic tradition says that Korah and Dathan, that these guys have been grumbling all the way back since the time at the Red Sea, that whenever you read about the grumbling in the wilderness, that Korah and Dathan and these guys are always a part of it.

You know, they can never really join in the celebration. They're always grumbling. And this would suggest that a lot of that's motivated by envy, you know.

Because when that happens, when you envy somebody and they're excelling or getting a thing that you think you want, you feel diminished by that. You feel smaller somehow. And nobody likes to feel diminished.

And so what do we do? What's the kind of easiest way to deal with it when you're feeling diminished by the goodness in somebody else's life? Well, it's very tempting to deal with envy by tearing down the people that we envy.

[12 : 54] Right? That's kind of like the quickest solution is to tear down the people that we envy. Because we mistakenly think, if I make that person smaller, it's going to make me feel taller.

Right? If I can make them seem a little smaller, it's going to make me seem a little taller. And so this is what Korah's doing. He's saying, Moses doesn't deserve to be a leader. Moses doesn't deserve this position.

Moses is a self-promoter. Clearly, he's exalting himself. Can't you all see it? He's trying to build himself up. And what's really going on is Korah's trying to build himself up by tearing Moses down, by tearing Aaron down.

But that never works. But, you know, this is no different than the way people talk about one of their colleagues when you're all peers and then one of you gets promoted. And just the way the kind of behind-the-scenes, behind-closed-doors conversations about the person that all of a sudden is now promoted over the rest of you.

And all the ways people say, oh, well, he doesn't deserve that. He only got it because he's a kiss-up. He's not qualified for that. And what's the subtext of that? I could do a much better job. I deserve that more than he ever did.

[14 : 08] And, you know, I hate to say it, but you hear this kind of talk among pastors sometimes as well, and maybe some of you have heard this kind of talk before.

You know, it's always interesting to hear kind of smaller church pastors talk about the larger, more successful church down the road. And they'll have kind of on the service some biblical, legitimate-sounding critiques. Oh, well, the only reason they're that way is because they compromise the gospel.

You know, it's because they're too numbers-focused. It's because they're too corporate, you know, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But behind those legitimate critiques, if we're really honest, there's a whole lot of envy going on, deriving that kind of talk.

So envy is a major problem, you know. It's destructive to us. It rots the bones. It's also destructive to the people around us. We can't celebrate the good things that happen in the lives of our friends.

So then we have to ask, if this is such a problem, what's the way out? What's the way out? Now, this text doesn't seem to offer a whole lot of hope for those of us who feel envy, but I think there's more hope than we see at first pass.

[15 : 13] So what's the way out of envy? Well, Moses responds to these accusations with amazing grace. He doesn't respond by puffing out his chest, by saying, how dare you?

All I've done for you, and this is how you repay me. He responds in a characteristic way of humility and prayerfulness. He falls to his face.

And then he does what we've needed someone to do since the beginning of the chapter. He turns the whole focus back to God. His first response is to say, this is above my pay grade.

This is something only the Lord can sort out. And so the way out of envy starts by recognizing that envy happens when we take our eyes off God and we begin to focus on the people around us.

When we take our eyes off God as the primary source of meaning in our lives, and we start to focus on other people around us. In other words, comparison feeds envy. The more we focus on and compare ourselves to others around us, the more that feeds envy.

[16 : 17] And Moses says, you've taken your eyes off the Lord. We need to look back to the Lord. Because envy can't exist in our hearts when we are focused on the Lord. And then look what Moses says.

He says, starting in verse 8, it says, This response really shows us the next thing that we need to understand.

If we're going to climb out of envy. The next step is recognizing that whenever we feel envy, it means that we're ignoring God's goodness to us, and we're resenting God's goodness to others.

Moses is saying, look, look at all that God has done in your life. Look at all the amazing opportunities that God has given you, and all of your family, and all of your descendants.

Everybody descended from Levi. You have all of this amazing honor that God has given you. In our common life together. And you're completely ignoring that. And then you're resenting the good things that God has done in Moses' life, and in Aaron's life.

[17 : 41] Right? You're ignoring God's goodness in your life, and you're resenting God's goodness to others. You know, whenever envy sets in, one of the first things that we can do as a way to respond in faith is to stop when you feel that sour stomach, rotting bone feeling, to stop and to think, what are the blessings?

Where is the goodness of God in my life that at this moment I am ignoring, I'm willfully blind to? Because I'm so focused on this other goodness that I don't have.

What are the things that I'm willfully blind to at this moment? What blessings or provisions am I overlooking? So that's the second thing, recognizing that envy means ignoring God's goodness to us and resenting God's goodness to others.

Then Moses really gets to the heart of the issue in verse 11. He says, therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?

The third step in walking out of envy is recognizing that envy is not really about the other person. Right?

[18 : 50] The envy I felt for my brother's musical ability, that's not really about my brother. He has nothing to do with it. It's really a grievance that I have against God.

That's the core issue. Because the core belief that drives envy is that God has somehow made a mistake. That God has not given me something that I deserve.

And in fact, even worse than that, God gave it to someone else who doesn't deserve it nearly as much as I do. I really want to be a musician.

I would do so much more with that gift. I would do so much more with those talents. I deserve them so much more. Why don't you give it to Him? Why not me? God made a mistake.

And so along with that, there come all kinds of assumptions about God. Either God doesn't know me, either God doesn't love me, doesn't care about me, or God's powerless to give me these things.

[19 : 49] Right? Either He doesn't know me and doesn't love me, or He doesn't care, or He's powerless. But in one way or another, envy becomes a barrier between us and God, because envy is really a theological position that you're adopting about God and God's character and God's power.

And so it becomes this wall between us and God. And at the end of the day, who do we really resent? It's not the person with the nice job or the big house or the big family or the amazing opportunities or whatever.

The person we really resent is God. How could you let this happen? And so that's why Moses says, your grievance, the issue here is really, you've gathered against God.

You're opposing God in your envy. And so ultimately, that can only go in one of two directions. The first is what happens to Korah and Dathan and the rest.

Moses challenges them and says, well, if you think that you deserve to be a priest, if you think that that is a part of God's plan for your life, then why don't you act like a priest?

[20 : 54] Why don't you go and get a censer and put some incense in it and light the censer in the presence of the Lord, burn it before the Lord like a priest would. Do a priestly offering to the Lord.

And if the Lord is with you and you're reading the Lord's intentions correctly for your life, then nothing will happen. God will honor your offering. But if you are doing this in defiance of God's plan for your life, in defiance of the way that God has ordered this community to function, then God's going to make that known.

And of course, we know what happens. The ground opens up and swallows Korah in all of those with him. And you know, we read things like this in the Old Testament, and we think, how in the world are we supposed to make sense of something like that?

But the thing that we need to understand is this kind of response from God is not the norm. It's very much an exception. And when God does things like this, God sometimes does these dramatic acts of judgment as a form of poetic justice.

It's almost always a form of poetic justice that's meant to teach the broader community, including us, something about the nature and the consequences of sin.

[22 : 07] It's meant to be a dramatic act that makes such an impression that everybody's going to keep talking about it for generations. And it's a job mission complete, right? We're still talking about it all this time later.

And what we need to understand is this connects to how envy works. Envy is like a pit that you fall into, right? Envy separates us. It cuts us off from the love of God.

And in many ways, the trap of envy is like a little foretaste of hell. It's a little foretaste of hell. In the preface to the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis talks about the way he portrays hell in this book.

And he says, you know, hell is not really a place of pitchforks and lava pools. You know, it's more like a bureaucracy.

And he says, we need to picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives with the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment.

[23 : 18] For Lewis, living in a place like that for eternity was a much more biblical way of thinking about hell. In other words, hell is a place where God gives people over to the things that they have chosen over Him.

Right? So he's saying, if we choose to hold on to envy and resentment, if I choose to resent this other person and to resent God because I don't have the thing and they do, if I choose to hold on to that, one day God's going to say, have it your way.

And God will withdraw His presence, and then we will be left spending eternity with nothing to hold on to except our envy, except our resentment.

You see this portrayed also in his book, *The Great Divorce*, where people have just become entirely defined by things like envy, self-important, resentment.

Right? And at any point during this whole exercise, Korah could have repented, but Korah refuses to repent and he digs in his heels, he doubles down.

[24 : 26] So in other words, by clinging to envy, Korah was already living in a kind of self-imposed hell long before the ground opened up under his feet. God was simply saying, have it your way.

So the fourth step out of envy is to recognize that ultimately envy is rooted in sin, and it's something that we need to repent from.

And so we ask, well, how can we possibly do that? It strikes like a thief in the night, right? It jumps us from the shadows. How do we repent? And this is really why we need the gospel.

You know, as we said before, envy is rooted in a lie. It's rooted in the lie that God has not given me what I think I deserve, and instead He gave it to someone else who doesn't deserve it nearly as much as I do.

And so what repentance means is repentance means admitting the hard truth that we don't actually deserve anything from God when it comes to blessing and provision.

[25 : 32] And who am I to think that I deserve anything, right? Least of all, this thing that I'm coveting. And this is the thing that Korah never seems to understand. Korah and Dathan and Abiram and On and all of these compatriots, they don't ever seem to really get the fact that God's choice to use people like Moses and Aaron has nothing to do with their inherent merit.

Right? God's choice to use someone like Moses, if anything, is meant to highlight God's goodness. Right? Moses was a murderer who then left and went and lived in hiding. Moses had a speech impediment.

He was terrified of public speaking. And God says, that's the guy I'm going to use. Why? Because then there'll be no doubt that I'm the one leading and providing for my people.

And they never seem to understand that. They never seem to understand the principle that runs all the way through Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, that no one is worthy on their own merit to stand in the presence of God and offer worship.

That none of us are worthy of that honor on our own. And the gospel says that if we try to have a relationship with God based on our own merit, if I try to stand before the Lord and say, look how great I am, aren't you glad I'm here?

[26 : 51] You're lucky to have somebody like me, that we are standing on shaky ground. We're standing on very thin ground and there's no foundation under us.

There's just a big, empty cavern. And at some point, that ground under our feet is going to give way. That merit that we think makes us so impressive is going to crumble right under our feet.

So, God's choice to use people like Moses and Aaron is based entirely on His grace, on His willingness to give people what they didn't earn, don't deserve, and can never repay.

And we see a little preview of grace in action in this passage. You know, these guys have been a thorn in Moses' side probably all along. They've been grumbling.

Now they've recruited 250 influencers to basically bring about an insurrection. And Moses turns to God and says, God, could you please deal with these people? They're causing havoc in the community.

[27 : 55] I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what to do with them. And then God literally says, you might want to back up. Like, I read that and I cracked up because I thought, well, I laughed for like 10 minutes because I thought, I mean, how many times are you having a really hard time with somebody who's just making your life miserable?

And you say, God, could you please take care of this person? Could you please solve this problem? And God says, you might want to back up. I would be utterly thrilled. I would get a fold-out chair and a cooler of beer and I would sit down in the front row and be like, this is going to be awesome.

I don't know what God's going to do. But that's not how Moses responds, right? Moses immediately falls on his face and he intercedes on behalf of these men. And he intercedes on behalf of the community.

And he says, God, remember in your judgment, remember, these are all human beings of your spirit, right? Your spirit is in all of these people. Remember that. He intercedes.

And so God says, okay, separate the congregation out. I just want the ringleaders, right? And we see in Moses' response of grace and intercession this preview of someone else who would come who would embody this grace in a way that even Moses never could have imagined.

[29 : 12] The gospel actually says there's only one person ever to have lived who is worthy to stand in the presence of Jesus Christ, presence of God, and that's Jesus Christ. And the gospel says that even though we've all rebelled against God, even though none of us deserves to stand in God's presence as a worshiper, that we all deserve to go down into the pit ourselves, it says that Jesus loves us so much that He threw Himself into the pit of God's judgment.

Right? Before we could go in, He threw Himself in. Right? He took on the pit of judgment, the fires of judgment, and He gave His life on the cross to save us.

And that means that when we are standing on that shaky ground, when the ground is about to give way under our feet, Jesus falls to His face and He intercedes for us before the Father.

and He says, this is one that I gave my life for. This is one who belongs to me. Right? And that His invitation, His invitation, and we see an echo of this in His Sermon on the Mount, is stop standing on that thin soil of your own merit and build your house, build your life on the rock, on the foundation of my righteousness, on the rock and the foundation of everything that I've done for you.

And then you're never going to have to worry about the ground giving out under your feet. You're going to be on solid ground for all of eternity. Right? So if we're ever tempted to doubt God's love for us, we have only to look to the cross.

[30 : 45] We have only to look to Jesus' intercession for us, of which Moses' intercession is a small echo. But in this way, the gospel sets us free from slavery to feelings of envy because honestly, you know, the Bible talks about being slaves to sin.

That's how I feel whenever I feel envious. I feel like a slave. I feel like this taskmaster is making me feel and think and say and do things that I don't want to do.

And there's a part of me inside that's saying, no, no, no. Don't feel that. Don't respond that way. You should be happy for this person. But envy is like a taskmaster. And I say, no, you will resent them.

You will take no joy in this. I order you. You will resent them. But the gospel sets us free from that kind of slavery because if envy means believing that God doesn't give me what I think I deserve, the gospel says, that's right.

You know, what we deserve is judgment. What I deserve is the pit. But God hasn't given me what I deserve. Instead, even though I don't deserve it, God is pouring His love and grace and presence into my life every moment of the day.

[31 : 58] So instead of resentment, when you begin to focus on that, instead of resentment, the gospel produces gratitude. And there is no better antidote to envy than gratitude.

Right? And gratitude sets us free to celebrate with our friends, to celebrate when good things happen in their lives, to like the wedding photos in Bora Bora, to throw a housewarming party for the person who just moved in to the big, to throw a baby shower for the person who's having their fourth baby, to do things that feel so unnatural when you're sitting there doom scrolling at night on your phone.

Well, all of a sudden, your heart begins to shift because instead of resentment, there's gratitude. Right? Which is a... and the wellspring of which is the gospel. And it sets us free not just to celebrate God's goodness in other people's lives, but to pray for God's goodness in other people's lives.

And that's one of the best things that we can do when we envy someone, is to stop and to not only pray and give thanks for God's goodness in their life, but then to pray for more of it, to pray for more of God's goodness.

And you'll be amazed at how prayer begins to shift your heart. And then there's these great promises for those who put their faith in Jesus. The Bible promises that every spiritual blessing is ours.

[33 : 14] Ephesians 1. And that one day we'll experience the full truth of that. So it says, whatever you think you lack in this life, in whatever ways you think you're deficient, in whatever ways you're focused on your inadequacy, through Jesus, you will gain infinitely more, not only in this life, but in the life to come.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for the great promises of Scripture. Lord, and we thank You that even as we recognize that the ground probably should open up under us right now, Lord, that it doesn't.

Lord, that we woke up this morning with breath in our lungs. Lord, with the ability to get out of bed and to come here to worship You, Lord, and that those are all great gifts of Your grace to us.

Lord, we thank You for being the kind of God who is constantly giving us, continually giving us, far more than we could ever earn, far more than we deserve, far more than we could ever repay.

Lord, I pray that Your grace and not things like envy and resentment, I pray that Your grace would sit at the center of our hearts, at the center of our community, and that we would be marked by the gratitude that flows out of that, Lord, and that we would be a community that is able not only to support and care for those who are struggling and who lack, but, Lord, that we're able to be a community full of celebration for God's goodness in the lives of Your people, Lord.

[34 : 41] And we pray this, in this way, we would bring glory and honor to You. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.