

“Forgiven; Really?”
Genesis 50:14–21
Series: Behind the Scenes Week 6: Forgiveness
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For the past 6 weeks we’ve been studying Jacob’s flock – Joseph and his 11 brothers – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali and Benjamin.

We’ve seen God work behind the scenes to redeem the despicable act of the brothers throwing their father’s favored son Joseph into a pit and then selling him to a passing group of Midianite traders heading to Egypt.

And we’ve seen Joseph resist temptation, overcome despair, and remain faithful to God to rise from the pit to the pinnacle and oversee all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. We saw how God rises Joseph to this position to save not only all of Egypt, but his father, his brothers and their families as well.

A great famine spreads throughout Egypt and then Joseph’s homeland of Canan where his father Jacob and brothers still reside. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain to save them from starvation. Who has God orchestrated to oversee Egypt’s grain supply? Joseph! After revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph and family are reunited in Egypt and enjoy 17 years of prosperity together.

The great patriarch Jacob has now reached the ripe old age of 147. After instructing his sons to bury him in their homeland of Canan, the promised land of the Hebrew people, Jacob dies. Joseph asks that Pharaoh allow him and his brothers to take their father’s body back to Canan, to bury him there as promised in the family tomb alongside Jacob’s father and grandfather Isaac and Abraham. Because Joseph has earned his trust, Pharaoh grants his request and Joseph and his family lead a large funeral procession to lay their father to rest. Afterwards, Joseph and his brothers return to Egypt as promised.

And that’s when the trouble begins.

As many of us know and may unfortunately have experienced, it’s after the funeral that family dynamics can get dicey. Joseph’s brothers, the brothers he forgave 17 years ago for trying to kill him and selling him into slavery, start to worry. “Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him.” They don’t trust that Joseph has really forgiven them – they worry he only forgave them because he “had to” for Dad’s sake.

So, they start scheming. They send this carefully crafted message to Joseph: “Before your father died, he instructed us to say to you:” ‘Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did you – for their sin in treating you so cruelly.’

And now we, the brothers continue, the servants of the God of your father, in the name of our father, beg you to forgive our sin.

How does Joseph respond to their plea?

He weeps. He weeps. This one hurt deeply – After all he has done for his brothers, how could they not trust him? Hasn't he proven his love? He not only forgave them, he embraced them, brought their families to live near him in the best land in Egypt, saved them from starvation, and continued to provide for them and their families, never wavering in his forgiveness. His forgiveness reunited their family, bringing immense joy to their father Jacob.

Joseph's brothers now come and throw themselves down at his feet. "Look we are your slaves!" Ahhh, finally Joseph has them where he wants them. He has all the power. Payback! But Joseph has matured. He is no longer the young braggadocios boy of his youth.

He has seen how God has worked through his hardships all these years. His trust and reliance on God are the source of all his power. Joseph reassures his brothers by speaking kindly to them, "Don't be afraid of me. Am I God that I can punish you? You intended it for evil, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children." Genesis 50:19-21. Joseph chooses grace, offering mercy and love to his brothers.

How does he do it? Joseph doesn't ignore what happened or minimize or excuse it away. He calls it what it was – evil. But he doesn't let sin have the final word. He chooses the bigger story – God's story. Joseph forgives them, releasing them from feelings of guilt and releasing his own heart from the burden of grudge or resentment.

What can we learn from Joseph about how to offer forgiveness in our own lives?

Name/identify the wrong. Joseph calls out his brothers and the wrong they did to him. Bring your sorrow, your hurt to God in prayer. When we name the wrong, it can help lessen the sting, the pain.

Ask God for guidance. Look for ways God's working behind the scenes in the situation. Maybe you have a friend who really hurt you; pain is deep. Not OK the way you were treated. Yet you can see how God is leading you to a new group of friends.

Years later, you thank God for those new friends as these are the people who've stuck with you through tough times and joyful times.

Choose forgiveness – Maybe you've heard the phrase, Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Forgiveness is a choice. We are only responsible for our own actions. Choosing to forgive not only frees the other person, it frees you from bitterness and resentment.

Some of us may have experienced deeply harmful situations or relationships. God does not call us to allow those relationships or actions to continue to have the power to harm us. A trusted mentor or counselor can help set appropriate boundaries. If you need help, please reach out to Pastor Doug, me or any member of the staff for guidance.

Why can it also be so hard for us to accept forgiveness.

Have you ever apologized to someone, and they said, "OK, I forgive you," but somehow, you still can't believe it?

Maybe you think:

They can't really mean it.

I know she'll bring this up again someday.

He may say he's forgiven me, but he hasn't forgotten.

Just like Joseph's brothers. Joseph had already forgiven them. But they didn't trust his forgiveness.

Why? Because they knew what they had done. They remember the pit, they remember Joseph's face, they remember selling their own brother. Their guilt is overwhelming.

And now that their father is gone, they wonder: "What if Joseph has only been holding back only because Dad was alive?" They can't bring themselves to believe that Joseph's would really forgive such a terrible act.

Maybe you've done that with God – questioned if God could really forgive you.

We know the teaching, "In Christ we are forgiven." But somewhere inside, we think:

Surely not this one.

This time, I've gone too far

God might forgive other people—but if He really knew what I've done...

Isn't that sometimes us? I know it's me.

We know what we've done.

We know what we've said.

We know the person we've hurt.

We know the secret.

We know the mistake.

And sometimes guilt whispers: "God couldn't possibly still love you after that." Fight back against those lies with scriptures - Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. No thing. No person, no force, no sin. Nothing.

And don't put human attributes on God.

Joseph's brothers may be thinking: "If I were Joseph, I wouldn't forgive me."

We know how difficult forgiveness can be. We know what it's like to say: "I forgive you," while still hanging on to the hurt. So we assume God's forgiveness works the same way. We imagine God saying: I forgive you... but I'm keeping this one in the book of records...

Thankfully scripture gives us a radically different picture of God's forgiveness.

Psalm 103:12 says: "He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west."

We read in Micah 7:19 "You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean."

And 1 John 1:9 says: "If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."

God doesn't forgive reluctantly or because he feels obligated to. God forgives because forgiveness is part of who He is. The cross is God's declaration: "I know exactly what you've done—and I am still choosing mercy."

Why do we have such a hard time accepting God's mercy?

Sometimes we think we have to punish ourselves. We think: "If I feel bad enough, maybe I'll somehow make up for it." But our shame doesn't pay for our sin. Jesus already did. We don't need to add our suffering to Christ's sacrifice.

And we confuse repentance with shame. Shame says: I was wrong; I messed up big time. Therefore, I deserve to remain miserable.

Repentance is focused on conviction: "I was wrong. I am sorry for my actions. But I will turn around. I will come back to God."

Repentance, Conviction brings us toward God. Condemnation, Shame makes us hide from God. Remember Adam and Eve hiding behind the fig leaves? God does not want us stuck in a shame cycle. His son's death was worth more than that.

Sometimes we believe our sin is bigger than God's grace.

We whisper, "You don't know what I've done." And God says: "I know. I know all of it. And I still invite you to come home."

And notice something important in today's story: The brothers' inability to believe Joseph's forgiveness does

not make Joseph's forgiveness any less real. Their feelings, their worries, don't change reality. And neither do ours. When God says it is forgiven, it is forgiven.

It's not that God doesn't know what we do – he's omniscient – he knows everything past, present and future. In his great love, his great sovereignty, he chooses to forgive our sin and act like it never even happened. He chooses to remain in fellowship with us and blesses us.

“Real forgiveness seeks the fellowship it once had and goes out of the way to build bridges and restore it.” John Stott.

God offers us the ultimate bridge in Jesus – sending Jesus to bear our sin on a cross so that we would be reconciled to him once and for all. Apart from Jesus, forgiveness has no foundation. Jesus paid the ultimate price for all our sins. By faith in him, by believing the mercy and graces he extends to us, we experience true forgiveness.

Jesus forgives us to remake us. To remake us into someone who loves and forgives others. When we don't trust God's forgiveness to us, we limit the extent of our fellowship, love and forgiveness to others. If we don't believe, don't accept God's forgiveness, we won't love the way he designed us to love. That doesn't just affect us, it affects our partners, spouses, kids, friends, our serving and our ministry.

The last sentence of today's passage is one of the most beautiful parts of the passage. The brothers are afraid. Joseph could have said: I told you I forgave you. Get over it already.

Instead, Joseph speaks tenderly to them. “Don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children.” He reassures them by speaking kindly to them.

Sometimes we need to hear again:

You are forgiven. You are loved. You belong to Me.

God never gets tired of saying it.

And there is a bit of irony in this story.

Many years ago, Joseph's brothers put him in a physical pit.

But years later, the brothers were living in a different kind of pit: the prison of guilt.

Joseph had been freed from the pit. Now he wanted his brothers to be freed from their pit, their fear.

We can do the same thing to ourselves. The person who hurt us may have moved on. God may have forgiven us.

But we're still living in the same old broken record. Still replaying it. Still punishing ourselves. Still wondering: “What if God hasn't really forgiven me?”

God invites us to step into a new story.

“Don't be afraid.”

“I know your past.”

“I know your failures.”

I know the things you wish you could undo.

And I have already made a way for forgiveness.

Come home.

Maybe the question isn't:

“Can God forgive me?”

The cross has already answered that.

Maybe the deeper question is:

“Will I believe that God has forgiven me?”

So today the invitation is this simple:

Confess it.

Receive forgiveness.

Let go of the guilt.

And believe God when He says, “You are forgiven.”

Because forgiveness isn't something we earn by feeling bad enough.

It is a gift we receive by grace.

And sometimes faith looks like this:

Not doing anything more to earn God's forgiveness—And finally choosing to believe Him.

Today, I invite you to join me in bowing our heads, closing our eyes and taking a moment to free ourselves from the prison of unforgiveness.

If there is someone you need to forgive, name that person in your heart. Release the pain to God and accept the relief, the freedom God gives you.

If you need forgiveness, confess your sin to God and receive the assurance so freely given to us “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Friends, God loves you. God forgives you. God offers you freedom from the resentment and pain of unforgiveness. Will you accept his gift?

Join me in a word of prayer.