

## "Forgive"

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament is a narrative that reads like a short story or a brief novel. It's found in Genesis 37-50. Joseph is a young son of Jacob (Israel). Actually, he's the *favorite* son "because he was the son of his old age" (Genesis 37:3). As we can imagine, having a "dad's favorite" in the household caused a lot of family turmoil.

Because he was the favored one Joseph's 11 brothers hated him. They were jealous of all the attention and indulgences lavished on him by their dad. It didn't help, either, that God gave Joseph special ability to interpret dreams. For instance, one time Joseph dreamed that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in a field, and Joseph's sheaves stood upright while the other sheaves were bowing down to it. Joseph told his brothers that this dream meant they would all bow down to him and serve him. (Try that on your older brother or sister!).

Things got worse and worse and his brothers grew to hate him more and more. The brothers were shepherds and one day Jacob told Joseph to go out to his brothers, see how things were going, and report back what he learned. Little did Joseph know that by now the brothers were plotting to murder him, but softened somewhat and wound up throwing him into a pit instead. Image the scene: Joseph approaches his brothers...smile on his face...but as he gets closer he notices the stone-cold look on their faces. Surprised, and now alarmed, he slows down, then stops. Angrily they begin as one to approach him. They grab his arms and legs and heave him into an open pit. "There you go, you spoiled brat! Daddy's boy! Take that, you dreamer!"

The brothers go back to their father with a made up story – that Joseph was killed by a wild beast. The father is devastated. Meanwhile, Joseph is picked up by some slave traders passing by and is bought by a prominent official in Egypt named Potiphar. Joseph is alone, cut off from family and friends, in a foreign country. A slave.

But eventually, because of his integrity and because the Lord was with him Joseph rises to a responsible position in Potiphar's household. His life begins to turn around for the better. But do you remember what happened? Potiphar's wife tries to seduce this handsome young Hebrew, but he resists. Feeling snubbed and humiliated she accuses him of trying rape her, and he is thrown into prison by her enraged husband. There he is confined for a long time. Forgotten. But eventually, because word got out that he could interpret dreams, Pharaoh summons him. Pharaoh had a disturbing dream no one could interpret, but God gave Joseph the interpretation. There would be 7 good years for crops, then 7 horrible years of famine and drought.

Pharaoh rewards Joseph by giving him an even higher position of authority, and puts him in charge of the food supply. Under his leadership a huge store of surplus grain is accumulated, so that when the years of drought came Egypt would be ready. During those lean years Joseph was in charge of giving out the grain.

Meanwhile, the scene shifts to Joseph's family back in Canaan. They are hard hit by the famine, near the edge of starvation. Eventually they join the parade of others who travel from many nations to buy Egyptian grain.

*Now Joseph will meet his brothers again!* He will come face to face with those who despised him, caused so much hurt, and in some ways wrecked his life! One day he's at work, supervising those who are selling the grain. His eyes catch a glimpse of this group of 10 men waiting in line. Nothing unusual – but then - *it can't be! Not his brothers!* But it is! They don't recognize him. He's grown up now, no longer a boy but a man. Maybe his well-tailored Egyptian clothes help disguise him. (The years have a way of changing our looks, right? Like going back to your high school reunion! At my age it's like going back and hanging out with all these people who must be your classmate's grandparents)!

How will Joseph treat them? He has power over them now. He can refuse them grain. He can throw them in jail...do whatever he wants. Now's his chance for revenge! A casual reading of the story seems to indicate that Joseph is cruel and spiteful: he speaks roughly to them; he accuses them of being spies, and puts them in prison for 3 days; he holds one of the brothers, Simeon, hostage while he sends them back to get their little brother Benjamin; he has a silver cup put into their baggage and accuses them of stealing it. But as the story unfolds, we see that all of these actions are not meant for cruelty. He's developing a plan by which he can keep control of what the brothers do in order to gather information about his father and younger brother and eventually have them come to Egypt also.

His emotions are running so strong that he can hardly keep from screaming, "I'm your brother Joseph!" Finally, he can't stand it any longer. Let's read it straight from the Bible: "Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life'... Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him" (Genesis 45:1-5,14-15).

Eventually, his father Jacob and the whole clan are brought to Egypt. They survive the famine and are well taken care of in the land of Egypt.

*Joseph forgave them!* All they did to him – and he *forgave* them! ***How about you and me? Are you and I forgiving those who have hurt us?*** One of the hardest things to do sometimes is to let go of the resentment we feel towards people who have offended us, failed us, mistreated us, violated us in one way or other.

I have a copy of an article that was on the front page of the Lancaster newspaper a number of years ago. It shows a picture of a young lady, a senior at West Chester University, soon to graduate, who was killed on her way back to school by a drunk driver. It was his 4<sup>th</sup> arrest for DUI. The article was written a year after the accident, and showed something of the parent's

struggle to forgive. The father (who is a Christian) is quoted as saying, "I do want him to understand, I forgive him, but we hold him accountable...we've had no sense that the guy is even sorry, but maybe he couldn't say that up to this point...I don't feel vindictive, but...it sounds like somebody has to make a statement that (driving drunk) is unacceptable behavior." The father further reflects, a year after the accident: "I think he needs some time to dry out...you know what's really ironic? The guy is still driving" while awaiting sentencing.

*It's so hard to forgive, but Jesus said we must forgive.* In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). The only part of the Lord's Prayer Jesus commented on was this part about forgiving. "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins." *I mean, that's pretty clear, isn't it!*

Other Scriptures tell us to forgive: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32). One of the things we are strip off if we are in Christ is "bitterness". We can let resentment and bitterness set up house in our spirit. We are to be tenderhearted and forgiving. What is the model for this? It is God forgiving us, in Christ.

Both the writers of Scripture and Jesus knew how destructive an unforgiving spirit can be. *An unforgiving spirit can destroy families.* There are families where members haven't spoken to one another in years. Families where children haven't forgiven parents for what they did or failed to do. Families where parents hold grudges against children, or siblings resent other siblings. I conducted a funeral service once where, riding with the funeral director to the cemetery after the service in the church, he told me how that family was so divided. He had to be careful how he arranged the cars because some members of the family wouldn't ride in the same car. I thought, how sad.

*An unforgiving spirit can destroy churches.* Somebody in the church says or does something to us that we just can't let go. I served a little country church where two men in the church started a business together. As their pastor, I could see their excitement in fulfilling a lifelong dream. One of the men even remortgaged their house to get the business started. But the economy went bad and the business failed. I had moved on from that church by then, but I heard how somehow after the business failed these two friends became bitter enemies. It sucked the life and joy out of that little church.

*But an unforgiving spirit can destroy us too!* We think, "I'll show him...I'll show her!" "I'll get my payback!" But bitterness and resentment can hold us captive. It can rob us of joy and inward peace. Sometimes trigger physical ailments. It can keep us from experiencing God's forgiveness. I visited a church member once in the hospital who had just had a heart attack. He no longer attended the church. A long time ago he got offended by something that happened. Caught up in anger he stopped coming to church. When he told me what it was, to me, it seemed

silly and petty. I thought, what a shame, here's a man who cut himself off from the life of the church over a silly grudge. As far as I know, this man went to his grave holding onto that resentment.

Joseph was able to forgive the brothers who wanted to kill him. How can we forgive?

***The first step is to acknowledge and own our hurt, anger, resentment.*** Some of us have trouble admitting our anger or bitterness. Maybe we think good Christians shouldn't feel that way. Maybe we've been conditioned from childhood to feel that it's not ok to feel angry or resentful. Perhaps we were never allowed to express our angry feelings (especially at our parents). So somebody offends us or hurts us, and we respond, "Oh, that's OK." "No, I'm not mad." But we *are!*

Anger and resentment are *normal feelings*, the appropriate feelings to have in response to certain things that happen. Our spouse leaves us or wants a divorce. We've been sucked into a scam. Someone accuses us of something that isn't true.

And when the hurt is deep – like we've been sexually abused or the victim of a crime, it can take a long time to process the anger and rage that we feel. The first step in forgiving is to own our resentment – to hold it and own it. We can't let go of something we don't hold.

***Then, relinquish our unforgiving spirit to God and ask Him to help us let it go.*** Corrie ten Boom was a well known Christian whose family helped shelter Jews in Holland during the Nazi regime. She and her sister spent time in a concentration camp. She tells of years later meeting one of the German guards who had been in that concentration camp when she and her sister were prisoners there. She writes: "It was a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there, the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing. Betsie's pain blanched face.

"He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing, 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,' he said. 'To think that, as you say, Christ has washed my sins away. His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people...the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

"I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness, any more than on our goodness, that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

God can help us forgive when we in ourselves can't do that – so ask Him.

The first step to forgiveness is to admit and own our anger, then ask God to help us forgive.  
***Then follow that up and do the forgiving thing.***

For Corrie ten Boom, it was the act of physically extending her hand to this man. For us it might mean speaking with that person and saying, "You know, what you did really hurt me, but I forgive you. Can we move on from here? Or it may be sending an email or writing a letter to a person we haven't spoken to in a long time, and saying, "I forgive you, and for whatever I've done to offend or alienate you, I am sorry and I ask for your forgiveness. Can we try to work this out and start fresh?" Or it may mean coming to someone in church, taking that person's hand and saying, "I know things aren't right between us. Will you forgive me for my part in this, and I want you to know I have put my bad feelings over this behind me."

Just one more note from the story of Joseph: In spite of all of the family discord and the horrible things Joseph's brothers did to him, God was present.

Look at Joseph's take on things: "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you...God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Genesis 45:5,7).

*When we let God help us forgive, God can even bring good out of the worst of situations.*

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