

Origin Stories: Joseph's Reconciliation, Genesis 42-45, 6/9/24

Do you know the number one question that people ask me as a pastor? "Will my pet be in heaven?" And my reply is, "Dogs yes, cats no." But the number two question is really a category questions about forgiveness and reconciliation. How do I forgive my _____ for what they did to me? Does forgiveness mean I have to forget and act like nothing ever happened? If I still have hurt feelings or anger at times toward someone, does that mean I haven't forgiven them? And is it possible to forgive someone even if he or she has never admitted they did anything wrong? Even after I forgive someone am I expected to go back to the way everything was? Wow...good questions, good luck with that, let's close in prayer. Well there's hope for our struggles with forgiveness and our broken relationships. And the reason I know that's true if God can work forgiveness in Joseph's heart and reconcile Joseph with his brothers after 20 years after what they did to him? Then, there is no one we can't forgive, and there is no relationship that God can't reconcile, IF...and this is a big if...we do it God's way. That's what this story is about today.

When we last encountered Joseph, the 2nd youngest son of Jacob he was having a terrible, horrible no good very bad 13 years. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, thrown into an Egyptian prison. And yet, the repeated refrain of these chapters is that God was with him even in the darkest of times, Joseph didn't allow his heart to get embittered, He trusted God. After several years in prison, finally Joseph gets his big break God gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams and he gets the opportunity to do so for the most powerful man in the world at that time, Pharaoh. He tells Pharaoh, "There are going to be seven years of prosperity, followed by seven years of famine. Store up now so that you can be prepared later." Pharaoh is so grateful to Joseph that he promotes him to be the prime minister of Egypt- the 2nd most powerful position in the kingdom. Incredible! Now fast forward about 10 years. The predicted famine has come and the whole region is starving; the only place that has food is Egypt, because of Joseph's warning, so the whole region is traveling to Egypt to buy food, many lives are being saved. And Joseph is the man in charge of this entire distribution process.

And so, you see where the story is going. By the time we get to chapter 42, we realize that God has been behind the scenes coordinating these circumstances in Joseph's life...and now in God's providence he will bring Joseph and his brothers face-to-face for a surprise 20-year reunion. Now we are going come back to this moment and look at the process, but spoiler alert- I'm going to skip to the big reveal moment three chapters later... **Genesis 45:4-5 ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!**

⁵ 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. And so the broken relationships which began with the words, "The brothers hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (37:4), who want to kill him and end up selling him as a slave, are repaired and restored, all is forgiven at the end of the book of Genesis. Almost a fairy-tale ending, but when we get under the

surface of the story, there are powerful principles about forgiveness and reconciliation for us today.

[Blank Slide] And may you say, “Man, I wish I could skip to my own happy ever after ending and see my hurts healed, forgiveness extended or granted, and my broken relationships restored...but it doesn’t work like that, does it? It’s a process...When it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation, God’s way works through space and time, often a painful process that requires both hard work and heart work. The powerful moment in Chapter 45 doesn’t happen without the long, painful, heart transforming process of chapters 42-44.

Now at first blush as you read the story you might be confused because of Joseph’s interaction with his brothers doesn’t seem so forgiving and reconciling. Throughout this entire process he disguises himself so they don’t know who he is. He’s harsh with them and accuses them of being spies, putting them in prison for three days, he holds one brother, Simeon, ransom until they return with their younger brother, Benjamin, to prove they aren’t spies. And then when they come back in Chapter 43 with Benjamin, Joseph throws a banquet for them and treats them kindly, but when they prepare to return back home, Joseph sneaks his silver cup into Benjamin’s grain bag and then accuses him of stealing it, and threatened to make Benjamin his slave. What is up with all this? Is Joseph playing some kind of twisted game of revenge with them? Or is Joseph just an emotional basket case? Well, what I want to show you is that this is neither revenge nor erratic emotionalism. Joseph, for the sake of his brothers and on behalf of God, is leading his brothers through the Biblical process of what the Jewish rabbis call **Teshuva**- which they understood to be the conditions of true reconciliation, involving three concepts **remorse, repentance, and return**.¹

Let me show you these three steps of *Teshuva* that Joseph leads His brothers through. **Step #1: Remorse: Sorrow for sin.** Notice Joseph’s initial move in Chapter 42 starting in v.9 was to accuse his brothers of a crime they had NOT committed- being spies, holding them in custody for three days, to see whether this would remind them of a crime they DID commit- selling their brother into slavery. It has exactly the effect that he was hoping for. **v.21 They said to one another, “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 would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us.”²² Now we must give an accounting for his blood.”** Joseph sees that his brothers make the connection and they are remorseful and confess their sin. Step #1 complete. But is expression of remorse enough? How do we know if they truly sorry, or sorry they got caught, sorry they aren’t in control?

This is why Joseph leads them to **Step #2: Repentance: A commitment to change in heart and mind.** The second step takes place far away from Joseph back in Canaan, but he has so arranged the conditions so that he will know whether it has happened or not. Remember, Joseph is holding Simeon as ransom, being released only if they return with their youngest brother, Benjamin. Joseph knows his father Jacob, and he has rightly calculated that Jacob will only allow

¹ I am so grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for his insights into this process. *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*.

Benjamin to go if he is certain that his sons will not let happen to Benjamin what they let happen to Joseph. This is when in Genesis 43:9 Judah says to Jacob: *"I myself will guarantee Benjamin's safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life."* We see here Judah as the representative for his brothers, shows repentance and we see this in his commitment to real change in his heart and mind. Step #2 of *Teshuva* is achieved.

Now Joseph leads his brothers to **Step #3: Return**. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who helped unlock this passage and the understanding of *teshuva*, *"This occurs when an opportunity presents itself for repeating the offense once committed, and the offender is able to commit the offense, but refrains from doing so because of teshuva."* And how Joseph sets up this up Genesis 44 is a masterclass. Joseph constructs a scene - one could almost call it a controlled experiment. His brothers had once sold Joseph into slavery. Joseph now puts them in situation in which they will have overwhelming temptation to repeat the same sin by abandoning Benjamin to slavery and escaping with their own freedom. Benjamin, like Joseph, is a son of Rachel and is Jacob's new favorite son, and therefore likely to be envied and despised by the other brothers. When he sits the brothers down for a meal in Genesis 43:34, he ensures that *Benjamin's portion was five times as much as anyone else's*. There is only one explanation for this strange detail. Joseph is trying to make his brothers jealous of their youngest sibling. As far as possible, the circumstances of their original temptation have now been replicated. Joseph has offered the brothers a simple escape route. All they have to do is walk away and leave Benjamin behind. But this time, they refuse to sin. Judah, the representative, the very brother who was responsible for selling Joseph into slavery, steps up again. *Genesis 44: 33 "Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.* Judah offers to sacrifice his own life in place of Benjamin's life. Joseph has led his brothers through *teshuva*, true repentance, and as soon as Joseph sees it, he can't help himself anymore, he reveals himself, he is overwhelmed with emotion, love, compassion, the flood gates of mercy and grace open. Not only can forgiveness be given and granted, but so can true reconciliation of the relationships that were broken.

That's as far as we want to go in the story, maybe you say- "Well that's nice for Joseph and his brothers to have this fairy tale happy ending and all is right...but what does this story have to do with my life and my broken relationships today?" From Joseph's story we see **three principles of biblical forgiveness.**

#1 Biblical Forgiveness begins with a resolved trust in the sovereign love and justice of God.

Somewhere over those hard years, and it may have happened gradually, Joseph came to the place where he was no longer holding a grudge against his brothers for what they did to him. He had released them in his heart over into the sovereign hands of God.

See, here's where our boots on the ground theology gets tested, when someone really hurts us, betrays us, even commits crimes against us as extreme as Joseph's brother- what do we really believe about God? Forgiveness doesn't start in our emotions and feelings, it starts in our heads and our worldview. Do you really believe in the sovereign goodness and love of God, that he is

still for you and hasn't forsaken you and has something he is going to produce in you or others, or in the world out of this pain? And do you believe in God's sovereign justice? That he is the ultimate arbiter and avenger and he will bring justice so that we don't take revenge in our own hands? Biblical Forgiveness means that when you are tempted to make them suffer instead, you refuse to do it because of what you believe about God. When you want to stew in anger you release because of what you believe about God. If instead bit by bit you grant forgiveness from your head- because of what you believe, eventually you'll FEEL forgiveness in your heart and emotions.

#2 Biblical Forgiveness seeks the ultimate good of the offender.

This is important to clarify- seeking their good isn't that we want rainbows and butterflies for them, that they get off the hook and never feel any pain for what they did. What good does God want for everyone? He wants humility, recognition of our sin, he wants true life transformation of our character. He also wants innocent lives to be protected and justice to be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is ultimate good. This is what Joseph was after for his brothers, their ultimate good. Joseph when he first met his brothers, could have said- "Hi guys, it's Joey! Did you bring my coat? Never mind...I forgive you guys, let's put it behind us, let bygones be bygones!" Would that have been the ultimate good for his brothers? No, because it's possible they would have remained unchanged, unmoved and thought- we got away with it, God must be fine with it, even go on repeating their sins. But Joseph was seeking their ultimate good. This is biblical forgiveness.

You and I may never have the kind of authority, or the brilliance of Joseph to come up with the perfect way to pursue their ultimate good, but that doesn't mean we can't also seek it. Firstly, **You can pray**. We can pray that God brings our mother or father who mistreated us or failed as a parent to a place of repentance so that they can be restore and freed. We can pray for that friend who backstabbed you for their ultimate good whatever tool God may use to do that- which as Paul says in Romans 2:4 may even be *His kindness that leads to repentance*.

You can confront. Jesus tells us in *Matthew 19:15 If your brother or sister sins against you, go and show them their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over*. The Biblical pursuit of forgiveness does not take the path of least resistance. It does not detach and leave the relationship or the church. It does the hard work, like Joseph did to confront. To confront your boss if you are being treated unfairly, to confront your spouse if they disrespected you in front of the kids...not in anger and revenge, but seeking their good and the good of the relationship being at peace. The one caveat to confronting, if some extreme circumstances may need to first be in a place of safety for you and others before confrontation can take place.

You can Discipline. Joseph, in seeking the ultimate good of his brothers, was willing to use means of discipline into his brother's lives. Hebrews 12:6 reminds us that *God disciplines those he loves*. We know this as parents, we can't just let our kids do whatever they want, that's not loving. We must use discipline, just enough pain to break the strong will and rebellion of our children to bring them to a place of repentance so that we can be reconciled. In some

circumstances, I have counseled a husband or wife who has experienced abuse or infidelity- that the discipline of separation or in some cases the pursuit of divorce may be the only option, so that the weight of sin through discipline might be felt and lead to true repentance and possibly even reconciliation.

You may recall the name [Picture] Rachael Denhollander. She is the former gymnast who in 2018, was the first woman to publicly accuse the American gymnastics physician, Larry Nassar of sexual abuse, which eventually led to hundreds of other women to come forward with their own stories of abuse. Rachael is a Christian. And in her book *What is a Girl Worth?*, she recalls her long and painful process. She had to wrestle with forgiveness with God just as Joseph did. Ultimately, she worked out her theology in real life and she was able to release her anger, her desire for revenge and extend forgiveness and love. Her prayer, confrontation, and discipline all came together in the courtroom at the trial. There she looked at Larry Nassar and said, "I pray you experience the soul, crushing weight of guilt so that you may someday experience, true repentance, and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well." Rachael was seeking Larry Nassar's ultimate good- not escape from justice, she wanted him to experience *teshuva* with God!

#3 The Goal of Biblical Forgiveness is Reconciliation...but that requires *teshuva*.

We have already seen clearly that this was Joseph's goal. It wasn't enough just to forgive them, he sought reconciliation of the relationship, but that could not happen without *teshuva*...that process of repentance and change observed by the offender. Reconciliation always takes two, the one sinned against and the offender. **Romans 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*** Sometimes, full reconciliation happens- I've seen marriages that were a trainwreck be fully restored. I've seen family members who were alienated for years come back together. But it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes, reconciliation isn't possible. They refuse to repent, they continue to shift the blame, they are unwilling to change, to get the help they need for the addiction...that's hard. Sometimes you can be reconciled but the relationship may not be just like it once was for a complex number of reasons. But there is always our part because true forgiveness seeks reconciliation.

Now you say, man Pastor Nate, this is hard stuff! I think it's easier just to move on. Oh it may be. But you won't be changed for the better, you will miss out on the blessing, and keep in mind, forgiveness isn't an optional part of Christianity, Jesus says that if we can't forgive- it may just reveal that we haven't truly understood the gospel. You say, well I don't know if I can do this. You are right, you can't. **Alexander Pope once said, *to err is human, to forgive is divine.*** Because it is! It will require a divine, supernatural work in you by the Spirit of God. But the resources for Biblical Forgiveness are within the Gospel of Jesus, which is what this story of Joseph and his brothers ultimately points to.

Joseph wants to restore the relationship with his family, but he can't until Judah does what he does. What is that? Makes a substitutionary sacrifice. I'll step in for my brother and take the punishment. It's then that Joseph forgives and reconciles and brings them close in a relationship. And not only forgives but gives them grace and blessing for the rest of their days.

In the gospel, we see that Jesus is both the perfect Judah and the ultimate Joseph. Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice in our place to take the punishment of our sin was necessary for us to be forgiven and reconciled with God. But Jesus was so much more, Judah only offered, Jesus actually did it- he absorbed our offenses, he suffered and died for us. But he's also the ultimate Joseph rejected and betrayed by those he loved. And yet rising with position of power and authority to forgive because of his death and resurrection. He draws us close in relationship and we become his brothers and sisters whom he blesses forever and ever at his own expense.

When we truly comprehend and embrace the gospel at a heart deep level, forgiveness and reconciliation will be the frequency that our heart is tuned to.