

Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and will pay us back in full for all of the evil that we did to him."

¹⁶They sent the following message to Joseph: "Before he died your father commanded us, ¹⁷'You are to tell Joseph, "Please forgive the offense of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" Now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

¹⁸His brothers also came and fell down in front of him, and they said, "See now, we are your servants."

¹⁹Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive, as it is this day.

²¹Now therefore do not be afraid. I will nourish you and your little ones." He comforted them and spoke to them in a kind way.

God Meant it for Good

I.

Are you bitter? If someone has hurt you badly, it might be tempting to hold a grudge—to refuse forgiveness—to harbor ill-will for a very long time toward that person. Sometimes family members refuse to talk to one another for months, years, or even *decades* because of some injustice in the past. I've seen people refuse to darken the doorsteps of the church because some pastor or some church member offended them long ago. Forgiving those who have hurt or offended us is an unnatural response for unbelievers, and it is often difficult for Christian, too.

If ever there was a man who had a right to be bitter about the circumstances of life, it was Joseph. His story begins far earlier in the book of Genesis, and is filled with events that could easily have made him a bitter man.

As a boy, Joseph was the favorite child of his father. He would check up on his brothers and report their behavior to his father, so his brothers grew to resent him. Then he had the nerve to tell his dreams to his brothers. They figured he was getting too big for his britches when his dreams seemed to say that his brothers would all bow down to him. They teased him mercilessly, but then decided on more drastic action. While he was on one of those tattle-tail errands for his father, Joseph's brothers snatched him up, stripped him of his fancy clothes, and threw him into a pit. The injustice, indignity, and degradation of it all!

The plan was just getting started. The brothers were going to kill Joseph because of his insolence. Then, opportunity struck. A caravan of traders happened by. As a way to deal with Joseph, his brothers sold him to the traders, dooming him to a life of slavery. They cooked up a story to tell his father. "We found his coat, all bloody and torn. The poor lad must have been killed by a wild animal."

Joseph's troubles didn't end there. The traders sold him into slavery to an Egyptian. He rose in the ranks in his master's household, but then his master's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. He was unjustly thrown into prison. Even in prison, Joseph rose up the ranks. He found favor with the jailor and his fellow prisoners. He interpreted dreams for some of his fellow prisoners, but when one of them was freed, he forgot about mentioning Joseph.

Eventually, Joseph had interpreted a dream for Pharaoh. Even though he humbly admitted that it was really *God* who gave him the meaning of Pharaoh's dream, Joseph was elevated to a position of power and authority. Eventually, it led to a meeting with his brothers where he identified who he was, and brought his entire family to Egypt to escape famine.

If anyone had a right to be bitter about all these harsh circumstances of life, it was Joseph. Yet,

when reunited with his brothers, everything seemed to go well. Joseph made arrangements to take care of the whole family in the land of Egypt, and had done so faithfully for many years.

II.

“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘It may be that Joseph will hate us and will pay us back in full for all of the evil that we did to him’” (Genesis 50:15, EHV). His brothers knew Joseph’s back-story. After that tear-filled reunion in which Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers and brought them to Egypt, they no doubt heard the entire sordid story of all the evil things that had happened to Joseph over those many years. Their consciences had been heavy. There was no doubt that *all* the events of some twenty years could be traced to one fateful moment when they conspired to throw their brother into a pit and begin a long line of unfortunate events.

A lot of time can go by, and guilt can still consume. What might have been? How could I have done things differently? Would everything have been better if I hadn’t made that one fateful decision?

“They sent the following message to Joseph: ‘Before he died your father commanded us, ¹⁷“You are to tell Joseph, ‘Please forgive the offense of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’” Now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father’” (Genesis 50:16-17, EHV). The end of Jacob’s life is recorded in Genesis 49. *All* the brothers seem to be present as he gave his final instructions. The pattern of deceit seems to continue for the brothers. One lie after another they told to assuage their guilt in the past, and their attempts to cover up and preserve themselves just continued.

They had never gotten over things. The guilt remained. Perhaps they thought about how *they* would feel in similar circumstances. They had been reconciled with their brother, but they were convinced that the mercy he had shown was only to soothe his father. Over the decades, their guilt had only grown more acute. The only way they knew to deal with guilt was the same way they had in the past: cover it up. At least the cover-up would preserve their own miserable lives. “His brothers also came and fell down in front of him, and they said, ‘See now, we are your servants’” (Genesis 50:18, EHV).

The guilt, they felt, would never *really* go away. But it *could* be managed. Guilt is powerful. Sins that are never *really* confessed and forgiven often leave broken relationships. Things are covered up, but not healed.

III.

“Joseph wept when they spoke to him” (Genesis 50:18, EHV). Long ago Joseph had forgiven his brothers. When he was selling grain to foreigners who wanted to escape the ravages of the famine, Joseph was watching for his brothers to come, because he wanted to help them. He recognized the hand of God in bringing him to Egypt and putting him in this position of power and authority to help people, including and especially his own family.

When he finally revealed himself to his brothers, Joseph said: “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. ⁷ 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, NIV84).

All these years later, his brothers still never got the message. He has to explain it to them again. “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive, as it is this day” (Genesis 50:20, EHV).

Do *you* still carry guilt and need to be reminded of the forgiveness that is there for you? Our worship services include the confession and absolution to remind us again and again that God has forgiven all our sins for Jesus’ sake. We are reminded again and again that all our sins were placed on Jesus so that he could pay for them all in our place. All this so that *we* might have the forgiveness we so desperately need to take our guilt away.

Still, some have a hard time believing it. I have had people tell me they didn't come to communion because they didn't think they were worthy. They aren't. None of us are. But that is *exactly* who our Lord Jesus instituted this sacrament for—sinners who don't deserve forgiveness. Jesus' Supper reminds us that he gave his body and shed his blood for undeserving sinners like us. In that Supper we taste and see the forgiveness he won for us.

IV.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the parable of the Unmerciful Servant. He had been forgiven a massive debt by his master, but he went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed *him* a relatively small amount. "His master called him in and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to.'³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed" (Matthew 18:32-34).

Throughout his life Joseph showed the character of a God-fearing man who tried to do what was good. His brothers owed him a debt, for they had done evil to him. Still, Joseph recognized that *he* owed an even greater debt to God. As much as he had tried to do what was right, Joseph knew there were many times when he had failed. How could he take God's forgiveness of him and fail to forgive his brothers?

Joseph asked: "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive" (Genesis 50:19-20, EHV). Joseph recognized the hand of God. Yes, God kept many people alive. God kept alive the people who would be called the Children of Israel, from whom would eventually come the Savior long promised—the Savior who would take away the sins of the world.

Those who hated Jesus intended *their* actions for evil, too. They persecuted him. They mocked him and spit upon him. They stripped his clothing from his body and divided it among his executioners. They left him to rot in the prison of the grave. For two days he lay there, but the startled guards fled in fear on the morning of the third day when he emerged from the tomb alive. *They* had intended it for evil, but God intended it for good—the saving of many lives—the payment of sins for *all* lives, for to God *all* lives matter.

"Do not be afraid. I will nourish you and your little ones.' He comforted them and spoke to them in a kind way" (Genesis 50:21, EHV). Jesus brings comfort and peace through his forgiveness to us today. We have been forgiven much. Do not languish in the guilt of your sins, but recognize that in Jesus you have full and free forgiveness. God meant it for good. Live in the peace of that forgiveness. Share forgiveness with others so they know their sins against you are forgiven and they may live in the peace of the forgiveness. Peace to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.