

Genesis 50:15-21

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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.

Forgiveness

I.

What comes to mind when you think of 1984? I know, that's the title of George Orwell's dystopian novel, but I'm not asking about that. Where were you and what were you doing in 1984? 1984 was the year Ronald Reagan was reelected. Prince's album Purple Rain was released. Major League baseball had the longest game in their history—25 innings between the White Sox and the Brewers. The game Tetris was released. Alex Trebek became the host of Jeopardy. Those are a few events that happened in 1984.

There are some in our congregation who weren't even alive. As for myself, I was in Germany in the US Army. I hadn't met my future wife yet. I was shooting cannons and preparing to repel the Soviet Union, should they ever cross the Fulda Gap and start World War III. 1984 was 39 years ago.

39 years had passed since the sons of Jacob had sold their second-youngest brother into slavery. Joseph had been 17 when he had come out to visit them in the fields. The band of brothers didn't like the little dreamer much. He hadn't been so cocky when they threw him down a well and he begged for his life.

Magnanimously, they didn't kill him; they made a deal with some passing traders and sold him into slavery. A story was concocted to explain his disappearance to their father.

They hadn't anticipated the deep sorrow their father would feel. But it was too late. Joseph was gone. Even those who had been trying to save his life and bring him back up from the pit felt forced to go along with the lie. They concluded that Jacob would never find out the truth; Joseph would surely die in slavery.

They also hadn't anticipated their own feelings of guilt. Guilt ate at them from the insides. The brothers had no choice but to carry on with their lives, guilt dogging them every step of the way.

Eventually, during a time of famine that forced them to journey to Egypt to find food, they learned what had happened to their brother. He had lived! More than merely eking out an existence there in Egypt, Joseph had thrived. He was second in command under Pharaoh himself.

Joseph told them at that time that he didn't want revenge. He said to them: "God sent me ahead of you to preserve you as survivors on the earth, and to keep you alive by a great act of deliverance" (Genesis 45:7, EHV).

Nonetheless, guilt continued to plague them. They gave their aging father the good

news. They brought him and all the extended family to Egypt. They received from Joseph and from Pharaoh some choice land in Egypt on which they could live.

“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). In the back of the minds of the brothers for 39 years guilt had been weighing them down. Joseph, they thought, was probably just being nice to them for the sake of their father. You know how it is. Some families these days behave exactly like that. Everything *seems* to be ok in the family, but when the matriarch or patriarch of the family dies, the squabbles begin over the will. Past injustices that had been suppressed all seep to the surface.

39 years it was for the 10 older brothers of Joseph. It’s a long time to carry that kind of guilt. If Joseph had been 17, then the youngest of the plotters would have been at least 57. Most of them were probably in their 60s and even 70s. Guilt had been crushing them for most of their lives.

II.

Has guilt been crushing you for the last 39 years? Perhaps for some it has. Even if your guilty moment hasn’t been 39 years ago, maybe there is something you’ve been feeling guilty about for a long, long time. You don’t really want it to go unresolved for that long, do you?

A talk show host I listen to often says that rationalization is the second strongest human drive. He never defines the first—I’ll let you figure it out. The brothers kept rationalizing their sin, even though guilt was consuming them. They came up with reason after reason for their sinful actions to try to justify what they had done. Joseph’s reappearance made it impossible to rationalize any more; they had been forced to confess their sin to their father, but the guilt had remained.

Maybe you have rationalized what you have done, but the guilt still remains. You try to push it out of your mind, but it just doesn’t budge. King David had tried the cover-up method. He said: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away as I groaned all day long” (Psalm 32:3, EHV). It was the confession of his sin, the admission of his guilt, that began the true process of healing. He continued in his Psalm: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover up my guilt. I said, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the LORD,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5, EHV).

Have you lied to yourself and to the world about your sin for too long? Have you tried to cover it up and suppress it?

Maybe its not something you *did*, but something done *to* you. Rather than guilt over sin, perhaps you have been carrying the opposite—a desire for revenge.

“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.’ Joseph wept when they spoke to him” (Genesis 50:16-17, EHV).

The brothers thought it was likely Joseph had been carrying a grudge for 39 years and was just itching to get back at them. They thought that hatred had been simmering in his heart for all those years and it was more than likely going to boil over soon. They would get what they really deserved.

Still, they thought it might be worth it to plead for mercy. “His brothers also came and fell down in front of him, and they said, ‘See now, we are your servants’” (Genesis 50:18, EHV). What could they do as they begged for mercy? It seemed a logical course of action would be to offer themselves as servants. They would *become* exactly what they had *done* to him all those years ago.

III.

Long before the brothers offered their service Joseph had announced forgiveness to them. It happened when he was first making preparations to move the whole family to Egypt. As he proclaimed to them his true identity, Joseph had said: “Do not be upset or angry with yourselves for selling me to this place, since God sent me ahead of you to preserve life... ⁸It was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:5, 8, EHV).

Joseph didn't hold grudges. God granted him the ability to see the bigger picture. He had already been getting glimpses of the bigger picture as he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and then was commissioned to prepare for the famine during the seven years of plenty. God's prophesied seven years of famine were already part of that picture. Joseph understood that it was all part of God's plan.

Jesus told a parable of the unmerciful servant in today's Gospel. I had to look up some information. 10,000 talents is the equivalent of 60 million days' wages. Subtract Sabbath days when no one was supposed to do any work, and a debt of 10,000 talents would take over 191,000 years' wages to pay off, and that is with no other expenses.

The unmerciful servant was forgiven an enormous debt. No regular person could ever hope to get out of such a debt. The unmerciful servant didn't follow the “pay it forward” mantra, but demanded his fellow servant repay *him* a relatively modest debt.

Joseph didn't hear Jesus' parable. Still, “Joseph 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’” (Genesis 50:19-20, EHV). Joseph knew that God had been very good to him. Revenge was the farthest thing from his mind. He didn't want to shake his brothers down for a repayment of any debt they might have owed to him. The best way to thank God for all his goodness to Joseph was to pay it forward and be gracious and loving to his brothers.

IV.

“Now therefore, 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). Do not be afraid. Your sin is forgiven. Your guilt is covered.

What Joseph told his brothers is what God tells each of us. God has forgiven a load of guilt for us. Our debt to our Savior-God is far greater than 191,000 years' wages. Each sin deserves an eternity in hell. Jesus has paid many thousands of eternities for each one of us.

Those sins have been paid for. That guilt has been covered.

Don't keep carrying your guilt around for 39 years, like Joseph's brothers. Don't even deny your sins and carry your guilt for a year, as King David did. Lay all your sins at the feet of Jesus. Lay all your guilt on Jesus. He willingly took your load of guilt on himself and paid for it. Jesus wants you to be sure that he will nourish you and your little ones.

God doesn't tell us what relief Joseph's brothers must have felt or what their reaction was. I pray that they did *not* respond like the unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable.

When you look at the load of sin and guilt your Savior has removed from you, I pray that you don't respond like the unmerciful servant, either. Be forgiving of the guilt of others, as Joseph was to his brothers. By your kindness, lead others to see not only the forgiveness *you* are able to offer for wrongs done to you, but the more important forgiveness that each person has from the Lord Jesus for the guilt of their sins. Amen.