

## Forgiveness and God's Sovereignty

Genesis 50:15-21

### I. Introduction - Overview of the Joseph narrative

Some might say that Joseph was somewhat of a spoiled brat when he was a child. If that is true, though, he would have come by it honestly.

His father, Jacob, only wanted one wife. He loved Rachel. But because of the cunning craftiness of his uncle Laban, Jacob ended up marrying Leah, and only later was able to marry his beloved Rachel.

This resulted in a massive rivalry between the two women as they fought for the affection of their husband. It's really quite a soap opera, actually. Leah gave Jacob children, while Rachel, his beloved, was barren. Not to be outdone, Rachel gave Jacob her servant to bear a child for her. Also not to be outdone, Leah, finding herself suddenly unable to bear children, also gave Jacob her servant to bear her more children. Before all was said and done, ten sons were born to them.

Well finally, Jacob's beloved Rachel, became pregnant and bore Jacob a son. A miracle child. Born from Jacob's beloved wife at last, Joseph came into the world. He was Daddy's favorite. And to commemorate the favoritism, Jacob later gave Joseph a shiny coat of many colors which I'm sure Joseph wore proudly.

All this, as you can imagine, stirred the jealousy and scorn of Joseph's older brothers. They hated him.

One day their jealousy and anger got the better of them and they threw Joseph into a pit, and sold Joseph to a group of slave traders. The slave traders took Joseph to Egypt where they sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

This began a season of trials for Joseph. Although he was elevated to top status among the slaves, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. When Joseph repeatedly spurned her advances, she fabricated a story, saying Joseph tried to seduce her. This landed Joseph in jail where he was left to wonder why God was allowing such injustice to happen to him.

Well, you know the rest of the story. Two men in prison had dreams that God gave Joseph the interpretation for. Then Pharaoh himself had dreams and one of the men finally remembered Joseph. Joseph was called, God gave him the interpretation of the dream which turned out to be a warning from God about a coming famine that would last seven years, and would be so severe that even the seven years of plenty which would precede it would pale in comparison.

God gave Joseph divine wisdom to offer a solution, which prompted Pharaoh to elevate Joseph to the second highest position in all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

Well, the years of plenty came and Joseph oversaw the plan to put aside grain for the famine. Sure enough, after the seven years, the famine arrived. It was terrible, and people all over, not

just in Egypt, were sorely affected. One family in particular that was affected was...Jacob's family.

Jacob sent his ten sons to Egypt to buy grain. To make a long story short, Joseph finally ended up revealing himself to his brothers and invited Jacob to move his family up to Egypt so they could be provided for. And then, years later...Jacob dies

## II. Genesis 50:15-21

### **Pray**

How could Joseph – after suffering so much injustice – actually forgive his brothers? I want to make four points from our text that I believe will help us see how he was able to do that.

#### A. “Am I in the place of God?” (v. 19)

This rhetorical question is actually pointing to the absolute sovereignty and goodness of God. It states that God alone is holy and alone has the right to bring vengeance.

- When we withhold forgiveness, that is a type of vengeance – Joseph certainly was in the place to exact vengeance. He was the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. He surely was in a place where if he wanted to, he could have had vengeance upon his brothers. But He knew God alone is holy and God alone has the right to bring vengeance.
- When someone wrongs us, we need to remember that we are also coming from a place of indebtedness, an indebtedness from which we ourselves have been forgiven. And therefore, we have no right to withhold forgiveness.
- Colossians 2:13-14 tells us how much we have been forgiven. “<sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.
- In the very next chapter, Paul says that in light of that fact, “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Colossians 3:12-13)
- Matthew 18:21-35 - <sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

In her autobiography, missionary Rosalind Goforth tells of the internal rage she harbored against someone who had greatly harmed her and her husband, Jonathan. It was a serious injury which the couple would never afterward talk about, but while Jonathan seemed to easily forgive the offender, Rosalind refused to do so.

For more than a year, she would not talk to nor recognize that person who lived near them on their missionary station in China; four years passed and the matter remained unresolved and, to an extent, forgotten.

One day the Goforths were traveling by train to a religious meeting elsewhere in China. For months, Rosalind had felt a lack of power in her Christian life and ministry, and in her train compartment she bowed her head and cried to God to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here's what she wrote in her book:

*Unmistakably clear came the Inner Voice, “Write to (the one toward whom I felt hatred and unforgiveness) and ask forgiveness for the way you have treated him.” My whole soul cried out, “Never!” Again I prayed as before, and again the Inner Voice spoke clearly as before. Again I cried out in my heart, “Never, never. I will never forgive him!” When for the third time this was repeated, I jumped to my feet and said to myself, “I’ll give it all up, for I’ll never, never forgive!”*

One day afterward, Rosalind was reading to the children from Pilgrim's Progress. It was the passage in which a man in a cage moans, "I have grieved the Spirit, and He is gone: I have provoked God to anger, and He has left me." Instantly a terrible conviction came upon her, and for two days and nights she felt in terrible despair.

Finally, talking late at night with a fellow missionary, a young widower, she burst into sobs and told him the whole story. "But Mrs. Goforth," he said, "are you willing to write the letter?"

At length she replied, "Yes."

"Then go at once and write it."

Rosalind jumped up, ran into the house, and wrote a few lines of humble apology for her actions, without any reference to his. The joy and peace of her Christian life returned.

"From that time," Rosalind wrote in her autobiography, "I have never dared not to forgive."<sup>1</sup>

**Point #1:** We must forgive because we, ourselves, have been forgiven.

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B. "As for you, you meant evil against me..." (v. 20)

1. Joseph's brothers were completely responsible for their actions. They meant it. This wasn't some accident. This was a purposeful act of hatred against Joseph spurred by the jealousy and murder within their own hearts. They were fully cognizant of what they were doing and therefore fully responsible. They meant it.
2. We must see the evil of this world for what it is – the result of man's sinful nature. Some people are quick to blame God or use evil as a proof that He doesn't exist, but it is our own sin problem that brings evil and suffering in this world.
3. True forgiveness does NOT say that the evil that was done against you is OK or gives it an excuse, but rather recognizes it for what it is.
4. Forgiveness is not denial. You can't just sweep the offense under the rug. If someone hurt you, you need to say that they hurt you. If someone wronged you, you need to say they wronged you. The question is, how will you deal with that? And in all actuality, you cannot truly forgive someone if you deny that what they have done is wrong. You must see it for what it is.
5. C.S. Lewis said, "Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it."

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Morgan. *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 312-313.

**Point #2:** In order to truly forgive, we must recognize evil for what it is.

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C. “but God meant it...”

1. God meant it. What is the “it” that God meant? Joseph’s years of trials and suffering. His brothers’ jealous rage. Throwing him into a pit. Selling him into slavery. Being lied to. Being thrown in prison. God meant it. This reveals intent and purpose on God’s part. It shows control and responsibility
2. It reveals the actions of an all-sovereign, all-powerful God who purposely brought about Joseph’s sufferings through His providential plan.
3. Now before you throw me out of here, let me show you one reason why this is a great thing.
4. How many times have you looked at all the evil in this world and felt despair and helplessness, as if everything was out of control? Where were you on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001? What did you feel when the second plane hit the other tower and we all came to realize that our nation was under attack? How do you feel sometimes when you see the news today and see our world unraveling before our very eyes? How many times have you felt the weight of your circumstances bearing down on you and you felt like life was over? You felt like you had no hope. Things were spiraling out of control. The job situation. The failing marriage. The prodigal child. The sudden sickness. A court battle.
5. It is comforting to know that in the midst of your circumstances, the God of the universe, the Creator of all things, is in complete control. That none of the happenings of this world are beyond His sovereignty. God is not up there biting His nails and saying, “Wow, look how bad things are! What am I ever going to do about all this?” God knows exactly where you are. As much as this baffles the mind, God is orchestrating each and every event of life. There is no point in time when God loses control of one molecule in this universe. And that means we are safe. Whatever the storm that rages, we are safe in His hands. The One who is asleep in the boat while the storm rages and all seems to be lost, He is the God who is in control of the storm. He silences the wind with a word because He is the One who created it with a word.
6. Jesus – Matthew 26:53-54 – “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup> But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”
7. When you think of this truth, how much easier is it, then, to forgive your brother, knowing that God’s got this?

**Point #3:** Recognizing God’s sovereignty gives us confidence to forgive those who have wronged us.

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- D. "...for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive." (vv. 20-21)  
"I will provide for you..." (v. 21)
1. This shows us that not all suffering is from evil intent. God certainly brought the suffering, but his intent was not evil.
  2. God knew that there was a famine coming and in order to protect His people and to show His goodness in the earth, He arranged to have Joseph in the right place at the right time, and doing the right thing, so that many people should be kept alive.
  3. We can take comfort in knowing that not only is God sovereign, but that He does what He does for the ultimate good.
  4. His ultimate purpose and plan is redemption.
  5. Isaiah 53:10-11 – "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;  
he has put him to grief;  
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,  
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;  
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.  
<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.
  6. What this verse is talking about is that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which, from a purely earthly perspective would easily be considered the most evil and wicked act ever done in human history, was actually God the Father's idea. It says it was His good pleasure to crush His Son. But what we have to see, and it's easy for us to understand this from our point of view today, is WHY God crushed His Son. WHY did He send His Son to die such a cruel death? It was for the greatest good that the world has ever known – the salvation of sinners who were doomed to spend an eternity in hell. Jesus willingly suffered greater suffering than any man has ever endured, being perfectly obedient to the Father's plan, so that He could bear your sins and mine. And all this was because of the amazing love that God has for His children. But Jesus had to endure such evil, He had to endure the absolute worst evil that the world could produce, so that when He came out on the other side, when He triumphed over sin and death and rose from the grave, evil would finally and forever be conquered.
  7. And in small, we see that same story in the Joseph narrative, who suffered injustice at the hands of sinners, but he realized that it all was God's will so that He could bring about a much greater good. And therefore Joseph could freely forgive.

**Point #4:** We can forgive our neighbor because God's sovereign will for suffering always leads to greater good.

You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

We see this so clearly in those famous words by Paul to the church in Rome, in Romans 8, verses 28 and 29: “<sup>28</sup> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;” (Romans 8:28-29 NASB)

### III. Application

Earlier this summer, a gunman opened fire inside a church in Charleston, South Carolina. As the gunman watched the blood flow from his first victim, he turned his gun on another...and another...and yet another...until nine victims lay dead in the final aftermath. Such a senseless and evil act. What remained in the wake of this murder were broken and grieving people who had their brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, and friends brutally and senselessly ripped from their lives.

Only days later at the bond hearing for the murderer, these same people, who had every reason to decry “justice” and call for vengeance, instead said...“we forgive you.” These people knew the love and grace of God and knew that only God’s forgiveness that shone through them was powerful enough to counter the hatred. They knew that bitterness and unforgiveness would only lead to more hatred, but this time it would have taken resident in their own hearts. They knew that if they didn’t forgive, that the murderer wouldn’t be the only one in a prison. They would have been held captive by their own anger.

This whole idea of forgiveness is counterintuitive. It’s not natural to forgive in the face of such evil. But then neither was God’s forgiveness of us. The One who had every right to not forgive...to send all of us to an eternal hell for our offense against His holiness, instead sent His Son to take our place, to suffer our punishment, to take our guilt upon Himself...Paul says, “so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

For those of us who follow Jesus, then, forgiveness is not an option because we of all people know how high a price God paid to forgive us. I want you right now to examine your heart. Who are you withholding forgiveness from? You are sinning against God by putting yourself in His place. Forgiveness is the fruit of true Christianity. Anyone who withholds forgiveness from his neighbor is not mindful of how much he himself has been forgiven. Jesus taught us to pray, “forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors.” Maybe there is even someone in this room that you need to forgive. Matthew 5:23-24 says that we shouldn’t even presume to worship God rightly if we have aught against our brother. “<sup>23</sup> So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Don’t leave here today without making things right, regardless of their reaction.

As the old hymn goes...Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. When we remember how much we have been forgiven and grasp what a sinner we are, how much we had wronged God and offended His holiness by our sin and how much Christ forgave us, we will have no problem forgiving our brother who wronged us. Because we have been forgiven so much more! But Jesus

paid it all! All to Him I owe. And a small portion of owing all to Him is our forgiving our neighbor when they wrong us.

Let's stand and sing this great hymn.