

Genesis 45:3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. 4Then 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! 5And 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. 6For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. 7But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God..."

14Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE

Dear Friends in Christ,

"Terrified!" Eleven men. Strong, physically fit, and terrified men. The fight-or-flight instinct had kicked in. Adrenal glands were pumping; pupils dilated; their skin had gone pale as blood rushed to the muscles and brain; pulses quickened, breathing too, for increased blood oxygen levels. Their eyes were riveted on the man in front of them. They were not spoiling for a fight, they were scared to death.

Scared because the man who had said, **"I am Joseph!"** was their brother. Now you might think that after a twenty year separation it should have been a happy family reunion. It wasn't. For twenty years now—twenty years!!—the lives of ten of these eleven men had been haunted by their last memory of Joseph. The last time they had seen their brother, he had been pleading for his life. He had been pleading *to them* for his life, and they refused to care. Who knows, they may even have laughed. I have difficulty imagining the scene. His ten brothers had been selling him to slave traders. As the human traffickers plunked the silver coins into the brothers' hands, Joseph begged that they relent. But no! They would be rid of their goody-two-shoes brother for once and for all. He would learn to respect his betters under the whip. And as for them, they had beer money for a month!

But their beer money ran out, and their satisfaction at getting more than even with their brother turned into remorse. Worse, it was a secret they had to hide from their aging father. As the brothers grew from hot-headed young men into husbands and fathers with their own families, Joseph was the memory they couldn't forget, the itch they couldn't scratch, the regret they had no way to make right. Oh, the misery!

And now Joseph, two decades later, through an unbelievable twist of events, stood before them. Now some of you know this story well. Some of you don't, so there is one more detail you should know. This was not just these eleven men meeting their long lost

brother in the self-checkout line at Wal-mart. They were in a palace, Joseph's palace. He is the senior statesman of a superpower. He is the right hand man of the king of Egypt.

Joseph in front of his "brothers" had the sort of power you have never encountered. I don't care if you have been hauled before a judge, a governor or a four-star general. You have never stood before a man with the power of Joseph. Joseph had the sort of power you hear about in autocratic regimes: he just says a word and you disappear—and no one asks a question because if they would, the same would happen to them. If he is having a good day, you'll die quickly. If he is having a bad day, if he has an axe to grind, he will fill the last week of your life with great pain. (Not to say Joseph was that sort of ruler, but he did have that sort of power.)

Now you know why *"they were terrified at [Joseph's] presence."*

Then Joseph did the irrational. He forgave them. They stood there like wide-eyed cornered animals. It didn't make sense. "How long is he going to toy with us? When will the other shoe drop?" But Joseph kept going on. He had forgiven them. He is going to take care of them. He will use his royal power to provide their food, and make land grants for them! What's going on? They are speechless. So Joseph keeps on speaking. He repeats himself, declaring blessing and forgiveness. And in eleven men, twenty years of remorse, of guilt, of haunted dreams, melt away.

I. Being Forgiven Enables Us to Forgive

This is what God wants for you. Or more accurately, this is what God has given to you: forgiveness. It should amaze us every evening to go to bed knowing that God, for Jesus' sake, has forgiven us. Never has a day gone by and we didn't sin against God. We used his name in vain. We neglected time in his word and prayer. We looked at others and their accomplishments, virtues and blessings and said, "Yah, but you know what else I know about her..." We savor the hateful news commentary about people who, we think, just aren't worth a bother. And still, every evening, we can humbly pray—maybe we should even tearfully pray—confident that it has already been granted, *"Jesus Savior, wash away, all that has been wrong today."* Come morning, we don't savor that forgiveness so we can go out and rob another bank. We savor that forgiveness so we can do what Joseph did in the forty-fifth chapter of Genesis: forgive as we have been forgiven.

That we in some small way might replicate the magnificent work of Joseph, we must start with the truth that for Jesus' sake we are forgiven. God treats us better than we deserve, far better. Hearing that, we undeserving believers then reflect Christ's love to the undeserving around us.

That sounds so condescending: "We forgive those who don't deserve to be forgiven"? Well, if it doesn't involve treating someone better than they deserve, then it isn't forgiveness. Being nice to someone isn't forgiveness. Being friends with someone who has a different opinion about politics isn't forgiveness. Hanging around with someone whose personality doesn't really mesh with yours isn't forgiveness. Those are good things. They might even be virtues. But those aren't forgiveness. Forgiveness is far greater.

Forgiveness can't happen unless someone has actually wronged you, hurt you. Then, in

the natural order of things, you have a right to hold it against them until they make up for it or pay for it. However, at the moment of forgiveness you choose to let all your rights in the matter dissolve in mercy and run down onto the pavement and into the storm sewer. That is forgiveness. You unilaterally say, “I give up any rights I have to make any claims against the wrong you have done to me.” It isn’t conditional, it isn’t partial, the matter isn’t dredged up at a later date. This is forgiveness we are talking about.

But for Joseph, it was easy, right? He can afford to just turn the page, just forget about it. I mean, he is the second in command of Egypt. And yet ask him. Ask Joseph about the thirteen years he spent in slavery and prison. Was it okay that his brothers did that to him so that he could have this? Would you let someone trade the best years of your life, age seventeen to thirty, in slavery so you could be as rich as Jeff Bezos? You would have to be more than a little money-hungry to make that trade! What traumas had Joseph experienced and seen that still haunted him? We don’t know. And yet when he could get even, or even just tweak their ears a little bit, Joseph spoke nothing but gracious words to his brothers. This is what forgiveness between people looks like.

This is what Jesus spoke of in our Gospel reading, *“I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”* Please, God, give me this sort of forgiving heart!

II. Encouragement to Forgive: Faith In Providence

There is another thing that we need to know and believe about God in order to forgive. True forgiveness has to be based on God’s forgiveness of us. A great encouragement to forgive is confidence in God’s goodness and care. If we don’t believe that God is faithful in his promises to care for us, we are going to be asking questions. “If I forgive this guy now, what will he do next time?” We will run cost-benefit analyses: “Can I afford to forgive?”

These aren’t questions Christian forgiveness asks. The Christian forgives firmly believing God’s promise: *“In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Joseph believed that. Three times he said this about his slavery and prison term, **“God sent me ahead of you.”** (5,6,8) He counted those lost years, not as his brothers’ doing, but God’s.

Joseph, not unlike the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, was willing to trust God to use his life in His bigger plans. If I can be sort of crass, Paul was willing to be a pawn on God’s chessboard for the good of so many other people.

Now here the skeptic raises his hand, “Well, sure Joseph forgave. That was easy. Look at what he got. He got a throne, a family, reunited with his brothers, and eventually saw his long-lost dad. Easy to trust God’s so-called goodness when everything turns out right! He wouldn’t have been Mr. Rose-Colored Glasses if he died in slavery.” Interesting you should say that. Go to chapter 39 when he was a slave, chapters 40 and 41 when he was in prison. You will find the same faith in God’s goodness, even in those dark years!

When we trust God’s goodness, that he will use all things for the good of his people, then forgiving becomes so much easier. We trust God. We do not worry about what are

going to lose if we forgive.

III. Being Clear about What Is Being Forgiven Leads to Rebuilding

Finally, we learn a third facet of forgiveness from Joseph. Maybe you think of forgiveness as sweeping things under the rug. There are times and places for that, but that's not real interpersonal forgiveness. Forgiveness confronts the cold hard reality. Joseph did not beat around the bush about what his brothers had done. He didn't agree not to talk about it. He said, "***Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here...***" Forgiveness requires we deal with a wrong. It even identifies the wrong as sin! We have no permission to say "It doesn't matter"—at least not literally. Yet here in naming the sin there is power. Naming it and declaring it closed empowers both sides to move beyond that terrible past moment.

Our reading concluded: "***Then [Joseph]... kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.***" This is what forgiveness does. It restores relationships.

Perhaps you have heard of this sort of thing. As the end of life looms large for a terminal patient, siblings who haven't talked for half a lifetime, reach out and find one another. They sit down, tears in eyes, and speak of the past with regret and they put the past to rest. They forgive one another. Later, when the terminal patient talks about it, you can see, even though the disease rages, a weight greater than cancer has been lifted off the soul. That's what forgiveness does.

Don't let forgiveness wait that long, to be enjoyed for so short a time. Forgive now. How do you start a conversation when the last time you had seen each other was under the slave trader's gavel? I don't know. Joseph and his brothers probably started with awkward small-talk about the weather. But talk they did; rebuild they did. They began living many years of reconciled lives. They had stories to tell of sins regretted and God's grace extended. Through their own lessons on forgiveness, they taught the next generation how to live like believers, forgiven and forgiving.

God grant you grace to forgive.

1. You must remember the forgiveness you have in Christ.
2. Trust that God will care for you, and that you will lose nothing in forgiving.
3. In forgiving, identify and lay to rest the sin. By God's blessing that will lead to rebuilding.

Amen.