

Facing Those Who Hurt Us **Genesis 45:1-15**

As we conclude this series on Joseph's life today we will be talking about a topic that can be very difficult, and that is: How to overcome the damage done by people in our past who have deeply hurt us. I'm hoping this will help some of us find freedom and healing in this area of our lives, but I also realize that just thinking about these things can be very emotional. So I'm purposefully not going to get too personal in this setting, but rather stick mostly to what happened in Joseph's life. But if this message stirs up some things for you and you feel like you need to go deeper, I encourage you to seek support and counsel from a mature Christian friend, pastor, or counsellor. If we can help you with that, please let us know.

God uses all kinds of people in our lives to shape our circumstances so that he can carry out his plans and purposes as only he can. Some of those people are wonderful and bless our lives in many ways, but some of them are evil and cause us great harm. We've seen that in Joseph's life and it's common in Scripture. When people cause us harm, we first have to work through things in our relationship with God – all those questions we have about why he would let us go through such pain and suffering – and these are the things we've looked at in Joseph's life in previous weeks. Eventually, by God's grace, we come to see that even though we suffer, God loves us, he is still in control, he is wise and good, he is for us, his favor is upon us, and all things will one day be made perfect. But we still have to deal with the people who have harmed us, and that can be extremely difficult.

People may be coming to your mind right now that have hurt you. These people can cause great harm even long after you've lost contact with them. In fact, the harm they caused initially can pale in comparison to the ongoing effect they have on your mental, emotional, and physical well-being. That pain can keep you in bondage to suffering for the rest of your life. We can experience fear, anxiety, and depression. There can be nightmares and post-traumatic stress. Anger, bitterness, and rage might well up. People can struggle with alcoholism, addiction, escapism, or over-medication. And there's more.

These things are like termites eating away at a house – weakening the framework of our lives and causing extensive damage. So it's critical that we not only work through our painful circumstances when it comes to our relationship with God, but also work through things as it relates to the people that hurt us. We need freedom, healing, and peace that only God can bring! I've seen people experience that and I hope you will too.

Joseph had to work through some deeply painful things when it came to his brothers and what they did to him. They despised him because he was their father's favorite and in their bitter jealousy, they kidnapped him and threw him into a life of slavery. We hear about horrible things like that happening in our world today and we have to realize that's exactly what happened to Joseph. A seventeen-year-old boy, away from home on a trip, who never made it back again. He was kidnapped and sold to traffickers, and it was his very own brothers who did it. The worst was his brother Judah – he was the one who convinced the rest of them to do it.

We've seen how Joseph worked things out in his relationship with God over the past few weeks, but how would he work things out with his brothers? Perhaps one of the reasons he never returned home after he rose to power in Egypt was that he was avoiding them and never wanted to see them again. Dealing with them would be very painful. It would pull up deep emotions that were much easier to just leave behind. There would likely be anger and deep sorrow for all the years he lost with his dad and younger brother. God had turned his suffering into something very good, but that didn't undo what his brothers did to him. Better to just stay away than to revisit those deep wounds.

But God had a different plan that brought him face to face with his brothers, and this morning we're going to see how that plan unfolded and how Joseph responded. It's a long story that covers Genesis chapters 42-44. You can read it later if you'd like, but for now I'm mainly going to give a summary. Then, at the end, we're going to look at a few verses in Genesis 45 to see what Joseph did.

We remember from last week that Joseph was exalted in Egypt because of interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. He was put in charge of preparing Egypt for the severe famine that Pharaoh dreamed about. Then, after 7 years of abundance, where Joseph stockpiled grain throughout Egypt, the famine came. And the

famine was so severe, it didn't just effect Egypt, it spread throughout that whole region of the world, including Canaan, which is where Joseph's family lived. By the second year, they were running out of food, and they, like everyone else, were forced to go to Egypt to buy grain. Their father Jacob sent the ten oldest brothers to do so, keeping Benjamin with him and out of harm's way.

It just so happened that Joseph was in charge of selling grain in the location they went to, but he had been given a new name and it had been over 20 years since he had seen his brothers, so they didn't recognize him. But he knew who they were. He knew very well. And I'm sure it would have been very surprising and emotional to suddenly see his brothers again. They were to blame for all the pain he had gone through. They were the reason he was ripped from his home and father, and cast into slavery. Yes, things had eventually turned out well for him, but he went through plenty of pain along the way.

I've had a few people cause pain in my life, and every once in a while I'll run into them, and it's not very fun. I feel a wave of anxiety hit my stomach. I start looking for a way to avoid them and I try to get out of there as soon as possible. You've probably felt something similar or worse. It can really rock your world. So now you know what Joseph was going through.

It's interesting to see how he responds. The first time he saw them, it says in Genesis 42 that he treated them like strangers, he spoke rough to them, and he questioned them about what they were doing. I think he was dealing with a whole bunch of emotions that were suddenly boiling up inside him. He wanted to know what had happened to his father and his brother Benjamin, so when they told him that they had come to buy grain, he accused them of being spies. That allowed him to question them and not draw suspicion.

He learned that his father and brother were still alive and back in Canaan. So he put his brothers in custody for three days while he took time to think. It was during that time I think he devised a plan to test them to see if they had changed. So at the end of three days he released them and sent them back home with the grain they needed, but he forced one of them to stay in prison until they brought Benjamin back – only if they brought their youngest brother would he allow them all to go.

This created quite a problem when they got back home because Jacob had no intention of letting Benjamin out of his sight, especially after what happened to Joseph. If something happened to him it would destroy him and he would never recover. But the famine persisted, and they ran out of food again. The only place they could go was Egypt, and if they showed up there without Benjamin they would never get out and Jacob's entire household would die. So Jacob had no choice, he had to allow Benjamin to go with them.

While this was happening, it appears that Joseph had time to work through some of his emotions toward his brothers because when they returned he no longer was harsh, but treated them in an amicable way. He set up a feast for them at his home and talked with them about their father. When he saw Benjamin, he was overcome with emotion and had to excuse himself, but he was able to calm down and return.

He still hadn't revealed his identity, and I think it's because he still didn't know if he could trust them. He didn't know if they had changed. 20 years ago they were very wicked, greedy men who caused him a lot of pain. So I think he was waiting to see evidence of change before making himself vulnerable. He wanted to see his younger brother and know his father was well, but he wasn't ready to trust his older brothers.

So after the feast he set up what I believe was a test. He had his steward fill their sacks with grain, but in Benjamin's sack he also placed a silver cup to make it look like he had stolen it. In the morning he sent his brothers on their way, but before they had gone very far he sent his steward after them to confront them about stealing the cup. They denied it and allowed him to search their sacks. To their dismay, they saw as the cup was pulled out of Benjamin's sack. They knew he hadn't stolen it, but they believed God was finally punishing them for what they had done to Joseph.

This was the scenario Joseph had wanted. What would they do with their father's new favorite son? Would they do the same thing to him that they did to Joseph? Were they still jealous and wicked men? Or had they changed?

As it turned out, Benjamin's brothers didn't abandon him. They returned with him to Joseph's house. And out of all the brothers, Judah was the one who stood up to

plead for his life – the very same brother who took the lead in selling Joseph to the slave traders. He told Joseph that if Benjamin didn't return, their father would surely die and he offered his own life in his place. "Take me instead."

That brings us to Genesis 45 and the passage I want us to read today. After seeing his brothers' attitude toward Benjamin and compassion for their father we now see how Joseph responded.

Read Genesis 45:1-3.

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

They knew what kind of situation they were in. The most powerful man in Egypt suddenly turned out to be their little brother who they captured and discarded long ago. They thought he was dead, but here he was in front of them. What was he going to do?

Read Genesis 45:4-8.

⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Those would have been shocking words for them to hear – a surprising response. Joseph should have been angry and punished them for what they had done. But instead he showed gentleness, kindness, and faith in God. As he stood before them he was free from the crippling effects their sins should have had on him. He

wasn't wrapped up in bitterness and rage and the need to get even. He was free to show kindness.

Where did that freedom come from? When I look at this part of the story, I see the power of forgiveness. I believe forgiveness allowed Joseph to respond like he did. Through faith in God he cancelled the debt they owed him because of their sin. He released them from his need to punish them and from their need to pay him back for the suffering he went through. Bitterness, fear and anger were not eating away at him and holding him in bondage, and he was able to show them kindness instead.

Forgiveness set them free in a way, but it set him free as well. Forgiveness is the key to being set free from the ongoing damage a person can have on your mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Forgiveness releases you from bondage to the pain their evil actions can cause you the rest of your life. In forgiveness you can find freedom, healing, and peace.

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is trusting in God and releasing that person from having to pay you back for the pain they caused. It's releasing them to God so that you no longer feel the need to punish them for their sins. Forgiveness includes the realization that God is in control over every circumstance in our lives – past, present, and future, and the faith that what others have done to cause us harm, God can miraculously turn around and use for good.

Forgiveness is the first step in finding healing and freedom from bondage to pain and bitterness. And forgiveness is a step that all of us must take as followers of Christ because of what God has done for us. In the story of Joseph we can see a foreshadow of what God did for us in Christ. We sinned against God like Joseph's brothers sinned against him, but God forgave our sins through Christ. God sent his Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so that all who turn to him in faith will be forgiven. And having forgiven us of our sins, he calls us to also forgive those who have sinned against us. Colossians 3:13 says, "if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Forgiveness demonstrates the glory of God and sets us free from the destructive path of pain and bitterness.

But there's one more step I want you to see. Joseph not only forgave his brothers, but he also sought reconciliation. This is a step that can actually replace the pain and bitterness with blessing. Forgiveness sets us free, but reconciliation brings blessing where there used to be pain. You can already see reconciliation happening in the verses we read, but you can see it even more in the last few verses I want us to look at.

Read Genesis 45:9-15.

⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. ¹⁰ You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.

Reconciliation is a beautiful thing that can follow forgiveness in some situations. You can see in Joseph's situation that he pursued reconciliation with his brothers by letting them back into his life. After observing and testing them, he could see that they were different, so he invited them into his home, blessed them with a meal, and eventually revealed to them who he was. He was seeking to restore the broken relationships. Beyond that, we see in these verses an outpouring of brotherly affection and an invitation for them to live in Egypt in the land of Goshen so he could provide for them and their families during the famine.

In some situations God may want us to not only forgive the people who hurt us, but also to pursue reconciliation. Again, by doing this we are demonstrating the glory of God who not only forgave us, but reconciled us to himself as our heavenly Father. God restored peace with us and in some cases he wants us to reconcile with those who hurt us. It is through reconciliation that we have the opportunity to bless and experience blessing.

But we also have to realize that in this broken world, reconciliation is not always possible. In Joseph's situation, he was in a position of authority and had power over his abusers. There was nothing they could do to endanger his well-being. He also took time to observe and test them and they had proven to him that they were no longer a danger to him. He waited until he felt safe and could trust them before he made himself vulnerable and attempted reconciliation.

That doesn't always happen in our lives, and sometimes the people that hurt us just cannot be trusted. If they haven't changed they may still be dangerous. God does not expect us to put ourselves back into an abusive and dangerous situation. So forgive them we must, but sometimes reconciliation is not possible.

This sermon may have stirred up some painful memories for you and you may realize you haven't yet experienced the freedom of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process that God does in us and doesn't just happen overnight. There isn't a magic wand that can just make the pain go away. But the power of bitterness, pain and anger can be broken and God can set you free.

I encourage you to take some time to reflect on God's forgiveness in your life. Think of how awesome God's forgiveness is and what it's meant for you. Then ask him for the power to forgive those who have sinned against you so you can demonstrate his glory. Release them to the Lord. Let go of your need to punish or pay them back. Those things will only destroy you and eat away at your life. Let God take care of that. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord, "I will repay." Trust him and release them to him and turn your attention to God's love for you instead. The process of forgiveness and healing can begin. The bondage can be broken and you can be free.