

## The Upward Spiral of Forgiveness Part Two

Good morning and welcome!

We are going to wrap up our series on the life of Joseph this morning with a message titled The Upward Spiral of Forgiveness Part Two. Let's begin by rereading the two passages where Joseph demonstrates his forgiveness. Gen. 45 and Gen 50

**45** Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Then 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! <sup>5</sup> And 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. <sup>6</sup> For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. <sup>7</sup> But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. <sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. Gen 45:1-8a

So Joseph is reunited with his father and family and they all move closer to Joseph. But after a few years Jacob dies, and Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph might still be holding a grudge against them for the ways they sinned against him. Gen. 50:15

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" <sup>16</sup> So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

<sup>18</sup> His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

<sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup> So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Gen. 50:15-21

### The Process of Forgiveness: Two Things Joseph Did

#### I. Joseph entrusted his life to God, not man

When people plotted harm against Joseph, he entrusted himself to God's good plan. Jesus did the same thing. 1 Peter 2:23 tells us he entrusted himself to him (God) who judges justly.

Then Peter tells us in chap. 4:19 that we too should entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator and continue to do good. Entrusting our lives to God doesn't mean we just lie down and let whatever's going to happen happen. It means we trust and believe that God is in ultimate control over our lives and no one

can destroy our lives. As David says: *what can man do to me?* This frees us up from the obsessing over what people have done to us, so that we can move forward in a productive, healthy way. Joseph did that from the earliest point of his brothers sinning against him.

This positioned Joseph to forgive his brothers and the next thing Joseph did in the process of forgiving flowed from this mindset.

## II. Joseph moved towards restoration, not retaliation (3 steps)

When someone hurts or wrongs us, damage is done to the relationship. Unless the wrong or hurt is minor, you can't just pick up the relationship where it left off as if nothing happened. Something has to be done about the fracture. When we've been hurt there is a natural tendency to want to hurt them back, or at the very least to cut off the relationship to avoid getting hurt again.

Joseph gives us a healthy example in how he moved towards restoring the relationship, not retaliating. Let's consider three healthy steps he took to do that, steps that help guide us in restoring our broken relationships.

### Step 1. Joseph verified that they had repented of their sin

I strongly suspect Joseph's interactions with his brothers would have looked very different if they had proven to be the same envious, murderous, betraying men they were 17 years earlier. Not that Joseph would have been vindictive towards them, Not that he was carrying pent up bitterness. But he would have been rightfully angered by their continued hardness of heart and he would have treated them in a proportionally just way.

Biblical forgiveness is a compliment to justice, not the obliteration of justice. Speaking of Christ's work to forgive us, Rom. 3 says:

*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Rom. 3:25-26*

The gospel isn't God waiving aside justice in order to offer forgiveness. It's God fulfilling justice and offering us forgiveness. The gospel is the demonstration of righteousness AND mercy. God is both just AND the justifier.

The other thing we see in the gospel about forgiveness is that it is conditional. God doesn't forgive us unconditionally. If that were the case, Jesus wouldn't have had to die for us to be forgiven. Nor would we have to put our faith in Jesus to be forgiven. Everyone would be forgiven regardless – unconditionally. But that is NOT the gospel!

Forgiveness is offered to us freely, but we need to repent and believe in Jesus for that forgiveness to be applied to us.

What does this mean? When someone is in a relationship that is characterized by injustice, abuse, or repeated broken trust, I believe it would be a misapplication to say they just need to keep forgiving, even when there's no repentance. The Christian needs to keep loving, yes. Jesus said we are to love even our enemies. But if there isn't genuine repentance, there aren't the necessary grounds for forgiveness. Forgiveness needs to be conditioned on their having a change of heart.

But that doesn't mean we have permission to be bitter, vindictive, and unforgiving.

We can entrust our lives to God and do good – pray for them, love them, be kind to them. In some cases that may mean forbearing with someone's sin, overlooking it, living with it. In other cases it may mean pulling back from the relationship because it's not healthy.

Being a forgiving person does not mean you become a doormat for someone to walk all over. Jesus wasn't that, Paul wasn't that, and the pursuit of healthy relationships dictate that we aren't that either. So the first step towards restoration is that the offender has a change of heart.

## **Step 2. Joseph absorbed the debt his brothers owed him and released them from it**

The ways the brothers had sinned against Joseph must have hurt him deeply. They rejected him, hated him, planned to murder him, sold him, abandoned him, enslaved him. They stole 17 years of being with his father and family in his homeland. He could never get those 17 years back. There was nothing they could do to return those years.

It was a big, big debt. Joseph absorbed it. This is where point #1 helped a lot – he saw his life as being in the care of his God. Sure enough God used the bad to bring about great good. But the pain and hurt, the debt, was still very real. There was no way to extract the debt from them, he had to absorb it.

Forgiveness absorbs the debt someone owes us. Jesus on the cross absorbed our sins by carrying them as if they were his own. He didn't extract payment from us, he absorbed the wrong, sin, pain, brokenness, twistedness, betrayal, rejection, injustice, and evil plots. As God poured out His righteous wrath (opposition to sin) on Jesus, Jesus absorbed it all. Until God's wrath for our sin was exhausted. None left.

Forgiveness doesn't demand repayment, it absorbs the debt. And then it releases the forgiven from the debt.

When Joseph's father dies and the brothers send a message saying, "it was our dad's dying wish that you forgive your brothers", it says Joseph wept when he got it. Why? Because he had already forgiven them and their message revealed that they didn't believe it. They were still living in bondage to guilt. That hit Joseph's heart – he had released them but they weren't living in the freedom of his forgiveness. He realized all these years they thought he was still carrying a grudge.

True forgiveness releases. You don't owe me anymore. You don't have to grovel. You don't have to live in guilt anymore.

When the Bible promises us that Jesus forgives us of our sins, it promises us that we are released from our sins. We don't (can't) repay Jesus. We don't have to grovel. We don't have to live in guilt and shame anymore. Praise God, we are released from our sin AND our guilt! Forgiveness means we breath the fresh air of being loved and released and welcomed back into relationship. Not because we paid back our debt, and not because it was no big deal. Because Jesus absorbed that debt for us.

Sometimes we carry guilt and shame as a way of paying for a sin we feel guilty over. Jesus doesn't want that. Let go of the guilt and shame and live in the freedom of forgiveness. Jesus wants you to feel love and gratitude for him. Not guilt. Live in the freedom of forgiveness, released to love and serve!

## **Step 3. Joseph chose words and actions that were healing**

When someone hurts us (or we hurt them) it creates a rawness, a fragility in the relationship. Words and actions have more power to damage than the same words and actions in a stronger relationship might have.

We don't need to walk on eggshells. If the relationship takes walking on eggshells it ain't healthy. But we want to choose our words and actions a little more carefully because our words can *build* or *burn* bridges.

Joseph intentionally builds bridges to his brothers with his words and actions. Bridges of healing.

Important to note that Joseph's words were honest. You intended *evil*...evil is a strong word. There's no whitewashing or denial of the evil the brothers intended. Oddly, relationships can't heal unless there's honesty. Individuals or families that live in denial or covering up just perpetuate the brokenness in their relationships. It may seem counter-intuitive, but honesty is essential to healing.

But there's honesty, and there's honesty. Joseph combined his honesty with warmth, a tender heart, and lots of encouragement.

*a. Joseph pulls them closer rather than pushes them away*

When Joseph can't contain it anymore and reveals that he's their brother, they were frightened and confused. They literally had no idea what was going on, just that this powerful man was saying incomprehensible things to them. So he tries again. Verse 4 tells us he said, "come close to me". He set a tone of intimacy and then he repeated what he had just said, but this time with an intimacy that helped them absorb that this powerful man in front of them is their brother.

The first time he was vomiting information: "I am Joseph, is my father alive???" The second time he was helping them process.

*b. Joseph has a tender heart towards them*

Actually, Joseph weeps – a lot! He weeps so loudly all the Egyptians heard it and word got back to Pharaoh, "somethings going on with Joseph – he's weeping really loudly!"

One of the things we naturally do when someone hurts us is we harden our hearts. It's protective. And if they have no change of heart, it may be somewhat necessary. But when we start moving towards restoration, we have to intentionally soften our hearts, be kind, towards them. Paul says be tender-hearted, forgiving as God has forgiven us. Unforgiveness leads to an untender heart.

Joseph had a tender heart. He wasn't afraid to be vulnerable with his brothers even though they had hurt him. Look at Gen. 45:14-15

**14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping.**

**15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. Gen. 45:14-15**

By showing tenderness towards his brothers – and guys, I'm not saying we should walk around weeping all the time, this was an incredibly emotional moment – Joseph was able to build a bridge relationally to them. It says after he kissed them and wept over all of them they talked with him.

*c. Joseph encouraged them by emphasizing the good God had done, not the bad they had done.*

Don't be distressed, don't be hard on yourselves. God has done an amazing thing through all this – He has positioned me to save thousands of lives, including yours.

*d. Joseph is generous towards them*

When they fear, he assures them he will take care of them. And more importantly to them, he will take care of their children.

Let's bring this series in for a landing. Nothing will keep us from spiraling upward more effectively than unforgiveness. Nothing can lift us upward in Christ so powerfully as forgiving as he has forgiven us.

You are forgiven in Christ. Jesus says, bend that forgiveness you have received outward to those who have hurt you. It may not change them. But being ready to forgive will free you.

Even if that person who hurt you never asks for forgiveness. Never admits they wronged you. Maybe always blames you. That relationship may never be restored. But your heart can be. You can be free from the pain and box they put you in.

It takes being healed on the inside first. God wants to do that for someone today. As we pray, put the hurt on the altar, give it to God. Maybe you find yourself afraid to open up to other people, withdrawing emotionally, suspicious.

Entrust yourself to God, do good, and cultivate a forgiving heart.