

Message #12
Joseph

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JOSEPH AND THE CHALLENGE OF RECONCILIATION IN OUR WORLD GENESIS 45:1-15

We live in a fractured world. On the world stage the land of Joseph and his family is still the focus of international news. Israel is surrounded by enemies. The Palestinians want a two state solution, but Gaza on the south was the base which Hamas used as a stage for a surprise attack which killed 1200 Israelis and led to the taking of about 250 hostages. How is Israel to establish peace with Palestinians, many of whom vow that the Jews must be wiped off of the map? Iran to the north funds many of these terror groups.

Closer to home we are in the midst of a national election where each of the two leading presidential candidates sees the other as the face of the devil. We Christians do have a responsibility to vote. But Jesus also told His followers that they are to be peacemakers. Hopefully however the national election turns out whoever wins will have some interest in peacemaking, in bringing people together.

Even closer to home most all of us have had experiences of being victims of injustice, mistreatment, and even downright evil. Sometimes these bad things have come from people who are close to us, sometimes even from family members. I heard a story recently from someone who was once part of our congregation who was the victim of sex abuse from his father.

The Washington family became victims of evil some years ago. Deirdra Washington, or Dee Dee, as she was called by her family, was a school teacher in Houston. One night she was out with her boy friend when a nearby drug deal was going bad. Shots rang out, and a bullet went through the car window and struck Dee Dee and killed her.

Dee Dee's family was wracked with grief and anger. Her father, who was also a teacher, was unable to go back to teaching. Her younger brother fought depression and later died from drug use. The shooter was a man by the name of Ron Flowers. He was convicted of the crime and sentenced to prison. Dee Dee's mom wrote angry letters to the parole board every year when Ron Flowers became eligible for release. Ron Flowers continued to deny his guilt. How does a family get over something like that?

The Jacob clan had a fractured family like this. We have seen that Jacob had four wives and twelve sons. These people were heirs of the promise of God to Abraham that they would produce a great nation and be a blessing to the whole world. They did not appear to be in a position to be a blessing to anyone. The whole clan operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. They were generally deceivers and saw no problem in lying when it suited their purposes. They did not seem to have much trust in the God of their ancestors.

We have seen that Jacob showed unwise favoritism toward Joseph, the son of his favorite wife. Ten of the brothers were jealous of him for that. They took advantage of an opportunity and sold him to traders going to Egypt. They lied to their father Jacob, claiming that Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal. One of the sons, Judah, married a Canaanite woman. He later had sex with his daughter-in-law, thinking that she was a temple prostitute. The whole clan appeared to be in danger of being absorbed by the Canaanite culture.

The Lord used two factors to move this family toward unity, toward a position where they might be capable of being useful to the Lord. The first key was Joseph, the second to the youngest son in the family. He proved to be a godly guy who didn't adopt his family's ethical standards. He trusted God, and persevered through difficult circumstances. He spent almost thirteen years as a slave in Egypt and then as a prisoner in an Egyptian dungeon. His God-given ability to interpret dreams resulted in a situation where he interpreted the dream of the Egyptian pharaoh. That landed him in the number two position in the Egyptian government. Under his leadership the country stored up grain during seven years of prosperity. They thus had reserves for the seven years of famine which followed.

The Lord not only used Joseph to move this family toward unity, He also used circumstances. The seven years of famine which followed the seven years of plenty meant that the Jacob family in southern Israel also suffered. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph was in charge. He recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. Joseph set up a test, demanding that the next time they returned, they must bring Benjamin, Joseph's younger full-blooded brother, who was now the favorite son of Jacob.

So we saw last week from #44 that Joseph gave them more grain, but he put his special silver cup in the sack belonging to Benjamin. After leaving Egypt Joseph sent Egyptian forces after his brothers and brought them back. The cup was found in the sack of Benjamin. How would the brothers respond? Joseph said that they could go and Benjamin would stay as a slave in punishment. Judah took the lead in pleading for grace and offering to give himself as a substitute in his brother's place. There was evidence of genuine repentance as Joseph heard them relate this difficult situation to their sin of having sold Joseph into slavery twenty years earlier.

The stage is thus set for reconciliation. Joseph has been successful in leading his family to the point of establishing unity. His ability to forgive was foundational to that. How was he able to forgive such terrible things that had been done to him? The passage before us this morning shows how and why Joseph forgave. What we learn about that will teach us something about what is necessary for reconciliation in a nation or a company or a church or a family.

I.

In vv. 1-8 of #45 we are going to consider **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND FORGIVENESS**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND FORGIVENESS) The brothers have passed the final test. Judah, the one who had taken the lead in selling Joseph as a slave, has just offered to take the place of Benjamin, the favored son of their father. Benjamin had just been set up by Joseph to take the blame for supposedly stealing the special cup of the prime minister. These brothers have changed. The jealousy and hatred and deceit are gone. They give evidence of genuine repentance.

According to vv. 1 & 2, **“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...”** Joseph’s cry is perhaps a mixture of relief and joy and remembered pain. It is the realization that the dream that God gave him over twenty years earlier that his family would one day bow down to him is being fulfilled. His cry is the hope that this family, which has suffered so much, is finally going to be united. It is a cry so loud that even Pharaoh hears about it.

Finally, Joseph says to his brothers, speaking to them for the first time in their native Hebrew, *“Ani yosef,”* “I am Joseph.” According to the text the brothers had not even told the Egyptian prime minister the name of their missing brother. Realizing something of the stress which this testing has caused his aged father, Joseph follows that statement up with the question, **“Is my father still alive?”**

The brothers are stunned. The text says that they could not answer him. **“...they were dismayed at his presence.”** The original verb literally means that they “trembled.” They were shaken up. First, this Egyptian official has all of the Egyptians leave. They can’t figure out what that means. Having just been accused of committing great evil, they may have feared that something bad was about to happen. Then this high Egyptian official starts wailing. Now he proclaims that he is Joseph. He speaks in their own language. He follows that up with the revelation of the family secret, that he is the Joseph whom they sold into Egypt.

In v. 4 Joseph invites them to come close. As the brothers begin to apprehend the truth, fear and guilt may have gripped their hearts. They are very aware of the evil which they have committed against Joseph. They are also aware of the power dynamics which have been reversed from the situation in which they were in charge over twenty years earlier. Little brother is now in a position from which he can get any revenge that he wants.

But Joseph quickly calms their fears. In a statement revealing tremendous maturity and insight he proclaims, **“And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.”** Herein lies the key to Joseph’s ability to overcome evil and to forgive. Notice that he does not deny reality. He does not pretend that what was done to him was not really that bad. Some people try to cope with evil done to them by trying to convince themselves that it

wasn't that bad, or they sometimes blame themselves. They try to suppress the horrible truth. But that does not work.

Joseph deals in truth: **"You sold me here."** What you did was evil. But he goes beyond that to recognize that God had a higher purpose in what happened to him. God is a sovereign God. While He is not to be blamed for evil, He allows it. He even uses evil to accomplish His purposes. Because Joseph believes that God is sovereign and that He is good, He is able to forgive. He is able to see that God had a greater purpose in the evil things that had happened to him.

This purpose has to do with preserving life. In vv. 6 & 7 Joseph explains to his brothers that there are going to be five more years of famine. God has put him in this position of leadership in Egypt so that he might be the instrument by which the Chosen People of God will be preserved from possible death and destruction in a severe famine. The Lord has also done this so that the family might come together in spiritual unity and be able to grow to become a nation and be a blessing to the rest of the world.

The Holocaust was one of the most horrible incidents in all of human history. Some six million Jews were cruelly murdered by an evil dictator. Yet out of that horrible event the modern nation of Israel was formed after having fallen out of existence for almost 2000 years.

In v. 8 Joseph again says, **"So it was not you who sent me here, but God."** The Lord never agrees with, or supports, or justifies, the wickedness of man. The lesson here is not that we should think more lightly of sin. The evil of these brothers of Joseph had serious consequences in their own lives. It caused disunity in their family. It created guilt. It produced separation from their father and from God. It produced pain and hardship in Joseph's life. But God allowed this evil, and God used it for good.

The Lord has also allowed people to do some nasty things to many of us. He sees evil actions for what they really are. But God is also sovereign, and He has allowed them for a purpose, and He can bring good out of them. The key issue is our response. Will we trust in God? Will we believe that He is sovereign over our circumstances, and that He is good? If we choose to believe that, then we will have the ability to forgive. When forgiveness happens, the door to reconciliation and unity is opened.

There is no hope for unity in the Middle East or in our country without forgiveness. Forgiveness comes only when we focus on a sovereign and a good God, when we place our trust in Him. There is no hope for unity and reconciliation in our marriages and in our families and in our companies and in our schools and in our churches and in our countries without a focus on the sovereignty of a good and purposeful God. That focus will lead to forgiveness and eventually the possibility of reconciliation and unity. We need to forgive our enemies and those who have hurt us. The way to do that is to lift our eyes from the dirt and mud toward heaven where our sovereign God resides.

Dee Dee Washington's mother Arna was a Christian. But it was tough to give up her anger toward her daughter's killer. She kept sending angry letters to the parole board demanding that her daughter's killer be kept behind bars. But then one day she says that she had a vision. She says that she heard Dee Dee's voice telling her it was time to forgive and pray. It was time to let go. Mrs. Washington wrote to the parole board, saying for the first time that she would no longer protest Ron Flowers' release.

II.

In vv. 9-15 we learn about THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND RECONCILIATION. (II. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD...) The Lord has so arranged circumstances and has worked in Joseph's life to bring about forgiveness. Now we find that this forgiveness leads to reconciliation. In v. 9 Joseph tells his brothers, "**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.'**"

Notice again the focus that Joseph places upon the working of God. He does not claim credit for himself in becoming prime minister of Egypt. He gives the credit to God. He also wants his brothers to get going in bringing about this family reunion.

In view of the five years of famine that yet remain Joseph proposes that the family move to the land of Goshen. (GOSHEN MAP) The exact location of Goshen has not yet been identified in ancient Egyptian documents. Probably it was in the eastern Nile River delta.

Joseph indicates that Goshen was near where he was living. The capital of Egypt at this time was Memphis, (MEMPHIS MAP) which was at the base of the Nile River delta, not far from the eastern delta region which may have been the location of Goshen.

Apparently the brothers are still having difficulty grasping and believing this story that Joseph is telling them. (PROJECTOR OFF) So in v. 12 he appeals to the fact that it is his mouth which is speaking to them. In other words, the translator whom he had previously used to speak with them is gone. Joseph is speaking to them directly in their own language, fluently and without an accent.

With one final appeal to his brothers to be quick about getting his father Jacob down to Egypt, Joseph turns his attention to his full-blooded brother Benjamin. This is the only other son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. When Joseph had been sold as a slave, Benjamin had been a mere infant. Now in this emotional reunion they weep on each others' shoulders.

According to v. 15, "**And he [Joseph] kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.**" This was the picture of reconciliation, of unity restored to a family. Key to this was the forgiveness of Joseph, who was able to deal with the evil that was done to him by focusing on the sovereignty of a good God, by being able to see that God had a purpose in the evil which was allowed to happen to him. The other element that was necessary to this reconciliation was repentance, the willingness of the brothers to seek forgiveness. We saw last week that circumstances

and Joseph had been used by God to bring these brothers to that point. Now we begin to see the payoff.

For 14 years Ron Flowers never admitted to killing Dee Dee Washington. He was resistant. But then an opportunity came along for him to become involved in a program administered by Prison Fellowship. It was an 18 month deal where inmates would have a little more freedom and a little better environment. Ron Flowers signed up for it and was admitted.

Ron was exposed to the gospel and became a Christian. There were meetings in the program where leaders spoke about victim-offender reconciliation. Ron said that he **“began to find it more difficult to remain unconcerned about the person he killed.”** During one small group session, he admitted his crime and prayed that the family of his victim would forgive him. Ron Flowers, who had not been a model prisoner, had begun to change.

It turned out that his confession happened the same week in which Arna Washington had a vision of her daughter telling her that it was time to forgive. She asked her pastor to pass along a message to Ron Flowers that she forgave him. The two of them exchanged letters. Prison Fellowship leaders set up a meeting for the two of them.

Mrs. Washington finally could ask questions that almost every victim wants to ask: Why did you do it? How did it happen? Ron assured her that Dee Dee was not involved in the drug deal. He answered her other questions. At the end of the meeting Mrs. Washington took his hands in hers and said, “I forgive you.”

When Ron finished the Prison Fellowship program, there was a little graduation ceremony. Arna Washington was there for it. As he crossed the stage to receive his diploma, Mrs. Washington rose from her seat and walked over to embrace Ron, the man who had killed her daughter. She then addressed the audience and declared, **“This young man is my adopted son.”**

After Ron’s release, Mrs. Washington helped him adjust to the community, sat with him at church, had him over for dinner, and even stood by him when he was married. Such is the power of God in bringing about reconciliation. (Breakpoint 8/7/2008)

On a broader scale one of the most touching and vivid scenes of reconciliation that many of us have witnessed in our lifetimes is the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. (PROJECTOR ON--- BERLIN WALL) It was an emotional scene in 1989 to see Germans from east and west sitting on the wall, chipping at it with hammers, singing and dancing beside it.

For thirty years the wall had stood as a barrier between Germans of east and west. The Communists of the east were the sinners who had erected this barrier which separated family members and countrymen from each other. But the Germans of the west were forgiving toward their countrymen of the east, recognizing that the Communist

government did not represent the feelings of the people. So they warmly welcomed the coming down of the wall and demonstrated their forgiving spirit by providing various kinds of financial aid to their brethren in the east.

The easterners in turn acknowledged the sin of their government. They repudiated the sins of their leaders. Thus the stage was set for a beautiful reconciliation that was witnessed by all the world. Today Germany is united. One evidence of that is the fact that the woman who served as chancellor of Germany for sixteen years up until three years ago was Angela Merkel. (ANGELA MERKEL) She is from East Germany. Her father was a Lutheran pastor.

It is this kind of unity which needs to be sought and maintained in our families, our churches, our schools, our workplaces, and our country.

III.

Consider finally RECONCILIATION AND THE GOD-MAN DIVIDE. (III. RECONCILIATION AND THE GOD-MAN DIVIDE) The Joseph story is the story of God seeking to establish spiritual unity in a fractured family. That family was intended by God to play a key role in His plan. These people were descendants of Abraham and were the objects of special promises from the Lord. They were supposed to grow into a great nation, and they were supposed to become a blessing to the other nations of the world.

In their broken state they were not in much of a position to be a blessing to anyone. But by using Joseph and circumstances and by bringing this family through the process of repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation, unity was restored.

The Joseph story is a subset of the larger story of God seeking to be united with mankind. The Bible is largely the history of God's effort to achieve reconciliation with His creatures who have rejected Him and sinned against Him. Jesus Christ is the central feature of this effort. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:19) The Bible declares in 2 Corinthians #5 v. 19 that **"...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them..."**

The story of Jesus' life has definite parallels with the life of Joseph. Early in his life Jesus had to go to Egypt because of one who was jealous of Him. That was King Herod. Jesus' own people were fractured. There were Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes and Herodians and Zealots. They were supposed to be united, but they didn't get along with each other. Eventually these people all rejected Jesus, even as Joseph's family had rejected Him. We are told in the Gospel of John #1 v. 11 (JOHN 1:11), **"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."**

Eventually this opposition came to the point of seeing that Jesus was crucified. In the midst of all of this Jesus, like Joseph, was able to forgive. For He recognized a sovereign, divine purpose in His suffering. (PROJECTOR OFF) He declared, **"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."** Jesus did die, and it

seemed as though the world would no longer hear from Him. But Jesus rose from the dead, and--- as with Joseph--- he rose to a position of great power. The Bible tells us that He ascended to the right hand of God the Father. As a result of His death and resurrection the opportunity for spiritual unity was created. The church was formed, which would be comprised of all of those who would have faith in Him.

But as we have learned from the story of Joseph, spiritual unity not only requires people who forgive, it also requires people who seek forgiveness. Reconciliation is not complete until the guilty seek and accept the forgiveness that is offered to them. We must accept the gift of forgiveness that is offered to us in Jesus. We must place our trust in Him as our Savior.

(PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19) The Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians #5, “.. **in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.** (2 CORINTHIANS 5:20) **Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.** (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21) **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

God is still seeking to be reconciled with people today. As with the story of Joseph He uses circumstances and people to draw us to the point of spiritual unity. He brings Christians across our path who seek to point us toward faith in Christ. He also uses difficult circumstances, as Joseph used them with his brothers, to bring us to our wits' end, to show us our need to truly be reconciled with Him. Perhaps even now He is drawing some of you to Himself.