

## **The Struggle to Forgive**

Genesis 45:1-15

*This is the fourth sermon in a series entitled, "The Struggles of a Yoked Life"*

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### "The Struggle to Forgive"

I was struggling with this sermon the other day when I had one of those "God-incidents" I've mentioned in the past. I got in my car and the first song that came up gave me the perfect introduction to my sermon. The song was "Forgiveness" by post-grunge band Collective Soul. Here are the lyrics:

In my silence, I would love to forget  
Restitution hasn't come, quite yet  
And with one accord I keep pushing forth  
I stretch my heart to heal some more

#### *Chorus:*

It used to be all I'd want to learn  
Was wisdom, trust, and truth  
But now all I really want to learn  
Is forgiveness for you

The song was written by lead singer Ed Roland who was raised in a Georgia Baptist Church; the song expresses his struggle to forgive.

Why is it so hard to forgive? I don't think Ed Roland is alone in that struggle; I think we've all faced that challenge at some point in our life.

One of the greatest stories of forgiveness is found in the life of Joseph, a story which begins in Genesis 37 and runs all the way through to Genesis 50.

Joseph was the favored son of Jacob's favored wife Rachel. Joseph had one brother, Benjamin, and ten half-brothers who were intensely jealous of Joseph because of his favored status.

As proof, Andrew Lloyd Webber can tell you that Jacob gave his son an "Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

Joseph was a dreamer and when he shared his dreams with his half-brothers, they hated him, sold him into slavery and told their father that Joseph had been killed and eaten by wild animals.

Joseph's trouble does not end there. In Egypt, and through no fault of his own, Joseph's slave master had him thrown into prison where he languished seemingly for several years.

In prison, Joseph the Dreamer interpreted the dreams of others and they come true. Eventually Joseph's God-given gift comes to the attention of Pharaoh and when Joseph again correctly interprets Pharaoh's dreams, he is immediately elevated to the position of Vice Pharaoh.

As part of the fulfillment of Joseph's dream, a famine devastates the whole region. However, as Vice Pharaoh, Joseph oversaw a massive food storage program so that Egypt had plenty while the rest of the region had nothing.

And that's when the story gets *really* interesting.

Joseph's brothers come to Egypt scrounging for food, and they had to go to the one who was in charge of the food storage plan—their half-brother Joseph. They did not recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognized them. As Vice Pharaoh of Egypt, Joseph could have simply snapped his fingers and they would have been executed. But Joseph didn't do that.

At this point, we tend to rush to the end of the story where Joseph forgives his brothers. But I would like to read the story "against the grain" by backtracking to chapter 42. Remember, this story covers several chapters in the Bible and we just may find a different Joseph and a different angle on forgiveness.

When the brothers first bow before Vice Pharaoh Joseph in Chapter 42, Joseph recognized them as his brothers. Yet he spoke harshly to them. He accused them of being spies. He refused to sell food to them, and he threw them into prison for three days.

Why do you think Joseph did that? Could it be that Joseph needed time to decide if he should forgive them at all? In chapter 45, Joseph emerges as the epitome of forgiveness, but back in chapter 42, he may have been struggling with forgiveness, much like Ed Roland struggled with forgiveness.

Why is it so hard to forgive? I think there are several reasons. First, **we may confuse forgiving with condoning**. In other words, we assume that forgiving someone is a way of saying, "What you did to me was all right."

When someone does something evil against you—or speaks evil against you—it is never all right. Evil is evil.

Psychologist Will Meek observes that, "There is a perception that if we forgive someone, it either lets the person off the hook, or is somehow an indication that what happened was OK."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the Joseph narrative feeds that perception because in chapter 45, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and then says,

"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...But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (vs. 5 & 7).

In other words, Joseph says that what his brothers did to him was not only okay; it was part of the plan of God. But that assertion comes only after Joseph has had time to

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/notes-self/201207/myths-forgiveness?fbclid=IwAR0CmT2FuKLxGay5x840Aa\\_FA-XCARcRBTVROE5RiM4jX3Yf242ZnazmZDQ](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/notes-self/201207/myths-forgiveness?fbclid=IwAR0CmT2FuKLxGay5x840Aa_FA-XCARcRBTVROE5RiM4jX3Yf242ZnazmZDQ)

reflect on the dreams God gave him when he was a young man with that “Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.”

Joseph’s rationale helped him to see the hand of God at work in his life—and in his world—but that rationale did not—nor could it ever—transform the evil actions of his brothers into good. What they did was evil and it’s only because of the mighty power of God that God was able bring great good out of their evil actions.

Finally, after three days, Joseph had his brothers released from prison. But even then, he put them to the test, demanding that they come back with their eleventh brother Benjamin. And while they were away, Joseph kept Simeon in bondage for who-knows-how-long. That’s Chapter 42 Joseph, and to be quite honest with you, that’s not a very forgiving picture of Joseph. Chapter 42 Joseph had no way of knowing if his brothers would ever come back to Egypt. And maybe he didn't care if they ever came back. But then he remembered his childhood dream in which his entire family bowed before him—not just ten brothers.

There are situations in life in which we simply must give ourselves time to forgive. I think that’s what Joseph was doing.

Second, it’s hard to forgive because we may confuse **forgiving with forgetting**. Here I think our text becomes much more helpful: Joseph forgave, but he didn’t forget.

Do you remember the tragic story of the shooting in an Amish school? Five children were killed on October 2, 2006. One of the surprising—if not shocking—aspects of that tragedy was how quickly the families expressed forgiveness to the shooter.

How does one do that—and so quickly? I would be outraged for the rest of my life! You can’t forget something like that.

As it turns out, one of the fathers who lost a child was interviewed in a documentary several years later and was asked about forgiveness. He clarified that he is often thrown back into anger and pain, but works for “forgiveness every day.” That father forgives, but he does not forget. Dr. Meeks says he prefers to “forgive and remember.”

On a less tragic level, if we forget, then we likely lose the benefit of the lessons which hopefully we learned in the experience. We remember the warning signs. We learn to trust our instincts.

And that brings us to a third reason why we struggle with forgiving others. I think some of us struggle with forgiving because **we may confuse forgiving with trusting**. Forgiving someone doesn’t mean that the relationship will ever go back to the way it was before. You do not have to trust someone once they’ve broken trust with you. After all, forgiving someone is an act of grace; but trust must be earned. On the other hand, forgiveness—like grace—is not meant to be earned.

What this means is that we do not forgive in order to condone or forget or reestablish trust. So why do we forgive?

We forgive in order to free ourselves. We forgive as an act of self-care because if we refuse to forgive, then we hold a grudge. And grudges can fester in our spirits like cancer of the soul, growing and eating away at our spirit, destroying our innermost self.

Sometimes we extend forgiveness directly to the person or persons who hurt us. Sometimes the act of forgiving is just between you and God.

I'm reminded of the man who complained to his pastor about a brother-in-law. "He's a two-faced, back-stabbing lying, good-for-nothing cheater and I'm going to get even with him."

"Wait a minute," the preacher said. "You're telling me that your brother-in-law is a two-faced, back-stabbing lying, good-for-nothing cheater and you're going to get even with him? That just brings you down to his level."

When we don't forgive, we bring ourselves down. When we do forgive, we raise ourselves up. We forgive so we can be more like Jesus, who, as he was being crucified, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

So what might we learn from Joseph? When first presented with the opportunity to forgive, he seemed to have struggled. But eventually, he came around and extended the grace of forgiveness to the very brothers who'd sold him into slavery. Their actions were evil and they didn't deserve forgiveness. But they received it. But that's always the case with forgiveness. It's never deserved, just as we don't deserve the forgiveness which God extends to us. But God offers it nonetheless.