

Message #9
Joseph

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JOSEPH AND A BELIEVER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SINNERS GENESIS 42:1-28

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

September 23, 1970, began as a normal day in the life of the Schroeder family--- if any day can be normal in a family with nine children. But it was not to end as a normal day. Father and husband Walter Schroeder (PROJECTOR ON--- WALTHER SCHROEDER) was on duty that day. He had a reputation for being one of the finest officers in the Boston Police Department. Just two years earlier he won the department's highest award for bravery. When a bank's silent alarm went off, he was there in a flash--- before the crooks had even escaped from the building. But before he could enter the bank, a lookout filled his back with several rounds from a rifle.

The three men in the radical antiwar gang that pulled the heist were captured within a few days and were charged with robbing the bank and killing Officer Schroeder. One of the two women in the group was nabbed several years later. But Katherine Ann Power (KATHERINE ANN POWER), the driver of the getaway car, eluded capture. For fourteen years she was included on the FBI's Ten Most-Wanted List. This quiet, academically-successful graduate of a Catholic high school in Denver left no trail that the police could follow.

But Katherine Power knew the truth, and she had a conscience that would not let her escape so easily. After twenty years of life on the lam she began to experience severe depression. For a time she was suicidal. She received counseling and got medical help. Her therapist later said, "**I've never seen anybody in such psychic pain.**" Her dark secret would not go away. In September of 1993 she turned herself in to the Boston authorities. (KATHERINE ANN POWER 2)

The Schroeder family had not forgotten Katherine Power. They remained bitter about her crime. Walter's nephew Francis said, "**It's always been with us. We think about it every day.**" Four of Walter's sons had gone into law enforcement, including Edward, who was a deputy sheriff in Denver, Power's home town. It was no coincidence that he chose to live in Denver. He said that he often fantasized about having her brought into his jail, where he guards federal prisoners. He told reporters, "**I just can't forgive.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

Forgiveness for participation in such a horrible crime tests the limits of human compassion. Is it possible? This past week marked the one year anniversary of the attack of Hamas on Israelites with the worst atrocities imaginable. How can there be forgiveness there?

One of the lessons from the life of Joseph is that forgiveness is possible, even for really bad things. Indeed forgiveness is not only possible, but it is often necessary if we are going to succeed in life.

We have seen from our study of Joseph's life that this honest young man was sold into slavery by his own brothers. As a result Joseph spent the next twelve or thirteen years of his life as a slave in a foreign country and then as a convict sent to prison on trumped-up charges. But Joseph somehow forgave his brothers. The evidence of that is in the passage before us this morning. Let's see what he was able to accomplish because of that forgiveness.

I.

First, in vv. 1-5 of #42 in Genesis we are going to consider GOD AND THE PURSUIT OF SINNERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD AND THE PURSUIT OF SINNERS) Last week we saw that Joseph was brought out of prison to interpret a dream that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had experienced. None of the professional dream interpreters could figure it out. Then the chief cupbearer remembered that two years earlier this young Hebrew had correctly interpreted a dream for him. Joseph listened to Pharaoh's vivid dream and told him that it meant that there were seven years of great abundance coming upon the land, which would be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph also gave wise advice as to how the government should prepare for this.

Pharaoh was so impressed that he made Joseph prime minister of the entire country. The next seven years were indeed years of great agricultural prosperity. Joseph saw to it that surplus crops were stored away. Then the lean years followed. Verse 57 of #41 left us with the comment, **"Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth."**

In the first couple of verses of our chapter we see that the patriarch Jacob is still leading his clan, as was typical in that ancient culture. Living in southern Canaan not far from Egypt, the famine had begun to take a toll on them. By now there were grandchildren as well as children and servants in this clan whom Jacob was responsible to feed. It would take a lot of grain to feed so many people for any length of time. They also had animals which needed food. So Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain.

He did not send his youngest son Benjamin. According to v. 4 Jacob said, **"I am afraid that harm may befall him."** As far as Jacob knew, Benjamin was the only remaining son of his favorite wife Rachel. Joseph was the other son of Rachel, but Jacob thought that he was dead. Many commentators have suggested that Jacob didn't trust Benjamin with the other brothers. But there is no mention in the text of the strong jealousy which existed between the brothers and Joseph being applied to Benjamin. Benjamin was also not a child any more. He was in his twenties. I am doubtful that the fact that Benjamin was now Jacob's favorite son explains the unusual fixation that the next few chapters reveal about how Jacob does not want Benjamin to leave his sight.

I suspect that there is another explanation. Back in #31 when Jacob and his wives had decided to leave their father and his father-in-law Laban in Syria, Rachel had stolen the household idols. Jacob's clan had left Syria without Laban knowing about it. But Laban caught up to the family.

Beginning with the words of Laban in v. 30 of #31 the text says, **“And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?’ 31 Jacob answered and said to Laban, ‘Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32 Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it.’ Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.”**

Laban did search for his idols in the camp of his son-in-law. Rachel, however, pretended to be having her period and hid the idols under her. When Laban came to her tent, she did not get up, and did not find them. Somewhat later God appeared to Jacob. At the beginning of #35 Jacob told his family to put away their foreign gods. The text says that they did. It seems likely that Jacob at this point, or sometime earlier, found out about Rachel's hiding of Laban's idols. Jacob remembered his pronouncement of death upon the one who was present with the hidden gods. A bit later Rachel died in giving birth to Benjamin. That vow of death must have returned to Jacob's mind. Had this vow been the cause of the death of Rachel?

Then some years later Jacob was told by his sons that Joseph had been killed by wild beasts. When Jacob had made his vow to Laban, Joseph was a small boy who was probably with his mother in her tent when Laban came looking for his idols. Was Joseph's loss also the result of Jacob's foolish vow?

It is possible that Rachel was pregnant with Benjamin when Jacob's vow was uttered. Even if that was not the case, the Near Eastern mind set was often that a child was in their parents before he or she was actually conceived. Was Benjamin also doomed by his father's vow of death? My guess is that Jacob was so afraid that Benjamin would die as a result of his oath that he kept him as much as possible away from danger. There was no way that he was going to send him off on a long trip to a foreign country.

But this way of thinking was also a reflection of a lack of trust in God. Though Jacob was the recipient of the blessings of God, most of his life was characterized by a lack of trust in the Lord. He was a conniver. He was a deceiver. This way of operating had also been picked up by most of his sons. The Lord needed to deal with this sin of faithlessness, and He was going to do it now by prodding Jacob to give up the most important thing in his life--- Benjamin.

The Lord was also working on Joseph's other brothers. It had been a little over twenty years since they had sinned against him--- about the same length of time that it had taken for Katherine Power to confront her wrongdoing. But God was still in pursuit of these ten brothers. There were two things that He was going to use to deal with them.

One was their consciences. The other was circumstances. For the Lord had arranged a famine that would cause them to go down to Egypt to bow down before Joseph.

The Lord uses these same two things to deal with sinners today. Most sinners, Christians and non-Christians alike, still have a conscience. It is difficult to escape the knowledge of one's sin. God is a perfect father to His true children. That means that He is also a perfect disciplinarian. So He will discipline His children for serious wrongdoing, and He will use conscience and circumstances to accomplish it.

Obviously not all the sinners who sideswipe us along the highway of life are true Christians. If they fail to turn to Christ, God will deal with them in the life to come. But sometimes He deals with them in this life. Conscience certainly played a role in Katherine Power's decision to deal with her wrongdoing. Circumstances also played a part. For she had a son who was growing up, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to hide her past and not be honest with him. Perhaps the Lord was pursuing her.

Perhaps there are some here today whom the Lord is pursuing. Perhaps you need to straighten something out with Him. Perhaps you need to seek forgiveness from someone else. There is no guarantee about how other people will respond when we seek forgiveness from them. But the Bible tells us that the Lord always provides forgiveness to those who come to Him in faith.

II.

Let's consider then JACOB AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINNERS (II. JACOB AND THE FORGIVENESS...), as it is described for us in vv. 6-17. As prime minister of Egypt Joseph had responsibility for the disposition of the country's stores of grain. I doubt that he was directly involved in every sale of grain. But perhaps he more closely oversaw sales of grain to foreigners.

As Joseph remembered his own dreams from many years earlier which indicated that his family would one day fall down before him, and as he saw the fulfillment of his interpretations of the dreams of others, and as he learned that the famine had struck his native land of Canaan, I suspect that it was no big surprise for him to see his brothers show up before him. My guess is that he was looking for them and praying for them to show up.

Joseph now watched as they bowed down before him and thus fulfilled the first of his two dreams. In v. 7 the author uses a pun and says literally, "**Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but made himself unrecognizable.**" It had been over twenty years since the brothers had last seen Joseph. He had been only a teenager then. Now he was dressed as an Egyptian official and was also using a translator. It is understandable that the brothers did not recognize him. Joseph, however, had no difficulty in recognizing his older brothers.

Joseph did not reveal himself to them. Instead he spoke harshly to them and accused them of spying. The last Joseph had seen of his brothers they had sold him into slavery.

Some of them had wanted to kill him. Joseph wants to find out what is going on with his family physically and spiritually before he reveals himself to them. He has many questions about his family's situation: How is his full blooded brother Benjamin? Is he alive? Is he an object of jealousy? Is his father Jacob still alive? Are his brothers still operating on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means? Have they confessed what they did to Joseph? What is the status of their faith in the true God?

The brothers, of course, deny that they are spies. No father would send ten of his sons on the same spying mission and have them all show up together in the same place. In v. 10 they proclaim that they are honest men. That is a fascinating claim, coming from men who lied to their father about the demise of Joseph. Joseph wants to test that claim to see if things have really changed.

So Joseph continues with his charges, and he questions the brothers about their family. They make reference to Benjamin being at home, and they speak of Joseph as the brother who "is no more." Joseph then tells his brothers that they must bring Benjamin back to Egypt. He realizes that Benjamin would be the favorite son of Jacob now, and he wants to see how his brothers handle this. Are they still deceivers and connivers? Do they have faith in God?

According to v. 17 Joseph puts them in jail for three days. Perhaps Joseph wants some time to think through his plan. Probably he also want his brothers to have time to think. He wants them to see some correlation between what is happening to them now and what they did to him earlier. Joseph got into trouble with his brothers for giving a true report about what they were doing in the fields. Now Joseph is accusing them of spying, perhaps for their father and clan leader. Joseph had been thrown into a pit by his brothers. Now they are thrown into a prison that earlier we saw was also called a pit. How will these sinners respond?

These verses demonstrate that Joseph has truly forgiven his brothers. His slavery, his imprisonment, his rise to power and the fulfillment of the dreams that he had interpreted all showed Joseph that there was a divine plan of which he and his experiences were a part.

If Joseph had not forgiven his brothers, this would have been a great opportunity to get revenge. He could have kept them in prison. He could have had them killed. More appropriately, he could have had them sold into slavery--- perhaps even made them slaves in his household. If Joseph had not forgiven them, he certainly would have revealed himself to them and taken advantage of his position over them and rubbed their faces in that dream which he had experienced years earlier. But Joseph did not do anything like that. His concern was for the spiritual well-being of his family.

Joseph had been the victim of great evil, at the hands of his own brothers. But he had forgiven the perpetrators. He had taken a higher view. He had come to have confidence that God had a plan for his life that even included the sinful actions of others. He

determined not to be controlled by the past. He chose to take responsibility for his own actions and to trust in a gracious God.

Some of us have had at least a taste of what it is like to be the victims of evil committed by others. It is hard to forgive. It is hard when the sinner is someone who should have known better. It is hard when the sinner is a family member--- a parent, a mate, a brother, a sister, a child--- or an elder or a pastor or a priest or a church. It is especially hard when the evildoer never even admits to any wrongdoing. But we need to forgive. We need to believe that the Lord can bring good out of wrongdoing.

Several weeks ago I shared my experience of being forced out of a church in the Midwest. My family and I were victims of evil. The people who did wrong never admitted any wrongdoing. It took some time for me to forgive and let it go. But that came eventually. I came to recognize that this experience was an advanced course in humility. It was part of the Lord's individualized training program for my wife and myself.

Those who think that a Christian should forgive great wrongdoing instantly have never themselves been the victims of great wrongdoing. To express instant forgiveness in the face of great evil would produce a shallow forgiveness. True forgiveness in such circumstances requires the victim to fully explore and experience the effects of the wrongdoing. Only after time has passed can meaningful forgiveness be granted. But forgiveness must come. It must come for the good of the Lord, for the good of others, and for our own good. To fail to forgive is to be controlled by the past and to remain under the influence of the one who has sinned against us. Joseph forgave. We can, too.

III.

In vv. 18-28 we encounter JOSEPH AND THE RESTORATION OF SINNERS. (III. JOSEPH AND THE RESTORATION OF SINNERS) The significant thing for us to notice in this section is that Joseph not only forgives his brothers, but he also becomes the instrument of restoring them to a right relationship with God.

After three days in the slammer Joseph brings the brothers out and tells them that they can go home with the grain that they need if they will leave one of the brothers in prison and promise to return with Benjamin. Notice in v. 18 that Joseph says that he fears God. He uses the generic word for "God." But it is significant that from the perspective of the brothers that he does not refer to any of the Egyptian gods. Joseph is perhaps planting the idea in the minds of his brothers that he is the instrument of God, and that God is after them in some way.

Joseph tells them in v. 18 that they need to carry out his orders so that they will live. In v. 20 he says that they need to obey so that they will not die. These statements allow for several interpretations. The brothers could have regarded them as a direct physical threat. But Joseph also could have been understood as meaning that if they wanted food to eat, the only place to get it was from this guy in Egypt. If they want food, they better obey Joseph.

On another level his statements could mean that if they want to participate in the blessings promised by God to Abraham's descendants, they had better begin to act in faith. For failure to trust God may mean exclusion from God's plan and absorption by the surrounding pagan culture. The Lord might choose to fulfill His promised blessing entirely through the descendants of Joseph. For God was wanting to use those who trust in Him.

Then in v. 21 comes probably the key verse in the chapter. The brothers do not realize that Joseph can understand and speak their language. So they say to one another, **"In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us."**

This is the only confession of sin in the entire Book of Genesis, and it comes from a group of brothers who desperately needed to come to terms with a terrible evil that they had committed over twenty years earlier. Somehow they saw a connection between their present circumstances and the sin that they had committed. It has perhaps been haunting them. Time alone does not resolve our deepest guilts.

Joseph must have been both thrilled and relieved to see that there was some spiritual sensitivity in his brothers. Their consciences were still alive, and God was using Joseph's plan to bring them to repentance.

Reuben responds to the brothers with an "I told you so," although his objection sounds stronger than the description we have of it at the time it was first uttered. It is also interesting to notice that Reuben assumes that Joseph is dead, that his blood has been shed.

The conversation overheard by Joseph is tough for him to handle emotionally. He has to turn away. But are his brothers truly repentant? Has their character really changed, or are they merely responding to the pressure of the moment? Joseph needs to find out. So he gives them the grain that they want, and he has their money put back in their sacks. On their trip back home one of the brothers apparently uses up the provisions for the journey and opens up a new sack of grain. There he finds the money that he had given for the additional supplies. He is upset. This prime minister who accused them of spying is now going to accuse them of stealing. They say to one another in v. 28, **"What is this that God has done to us?"**

The brothers are beginning to exhibit a Godward drift in their thinking. They are unknowingly giving expression to a main point in the story--- that God is sovereign. He is working out His plan. This providential God uses even the sins of people to accomplish His purposes. Here he is using the victim of wrongdoing to restore the sinners to a right relationship with God and with the entire family.

Forgiveness of sin is often difficult. The more serious the sin committed against us, the more difficult it is to forgive. When the sinner does not admit his sin, there is an added

factor of difficulty. When the sin is committed by family, by people who would be expected to provide love and protection and support for us, there is another factor of difficulty to confront.

Joseph was faced with all of these challenges. Because of his brothers' sin, he spent twelve or thirteen years of his life as a slave and as a prisoner in a foreign country. But Joseph did forgive. And he not only forgave, he went a step further by becoming the instrument by which his brothers were brought into a right relationship with God. He created difficulties and problems for his brothers not for selfish reasons, but to test them and to bring them to the acknowledgment and confession of sin.

We may not always be used in that way. Some people are incapable of performing in that role. That seems to be true in the case of the Schroeder family and Katherine Power. They were unable to forgive, largely, I suspect, because they themselves had not yet experienced the forgiveness of God that comes from trusting in Christ as Savior.

Many of you, no doubt, have been victims of people who have done some horrible things to you. You have encountered people at one time or another who have done you great harm. Perhaps you are dealing with such a person, or such people, right now. If you have identified yourself as a Christian, if you have trusted in Christ as your personal Savior, the call of God upon your life is to forgive.

It is true that forgiveness is not fair. It is not deserved. It is not just. But if we are truly Christians, we have to keep in mind that God has not dealt with us on the basis of justice. If He had dealt with us strictly on the basis of what is fair, we would not be headed for heaven. The Bible (EPHESIANS 2:8) declares in the New Testament Book of Ephesians, “...**by grace you have been saved through faith...**” It is this grace, this unmerited favor, that must be the basis of our action of forgiveness toward others. What does Jesus say in His model prayer? “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (PROJECTOR OFF)

Occasionally we may have the opportunity like Joseph did to be directly involved in bringing one who has sinned against us to repentance, to a right relationship with God. Many times we will not have that opportunity. But merely by exercising forgiveness and refusing to seek revenge the Lord can use us to point sinners to Him.

In Romans #12 vv. 19 & 20 (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 12:19), the Apostle Paul writes, “**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’** (ROMANS 12:20) **To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’**” In other words, by refusing to seek revenge and by doing good to the sinner instead, we can be used of God to convict him of his wrongdoing.

When we were living in Connecticut, there was a tragic incident that happened in Bridgeport, the city next to our community. (PROJECTOR OFF) A young man by the

name of Michael Carlucci went on a two day drug and alcohol binge. When his 24-year-old neighbor Scott Everett came over to the house to check on him, Carlucci took him for a burglar and shot him dead. Scott Everett's father was a Methodist minister. He was understandably upset about what his drunken and drugged neighbor had done to his son. He was even more angry when he found out that Michael Carlucci was going to receive only a five year manslaughter sentence.

But Pastor Everett also recognized his biblical responsibility to forgive. A month into Carlucci's prison sentence, Pastor Everett sent a letter to him expressing forgiveness. The two of them began to exchange letters, and a friendship developed. Carlucci said this to local reporters about Pastor Everett: **"He's been a major key for me, getting me started to stay clean and to live. He gives me inspiration to help others and myself."**

A couple of years after Carlucci got out of prison he got married. Pastor Everett presided at the ceremony. **"Anything is possible,"** Carlucci said. **"He taught me love and respect and enabled me to love other people."** Pastor Everett not only forgave, but he also became an instrument of reconciliation.

Are you holding a grudge against someone? Is there someone whom you need to forgive? The call of God upon us is to forgive and to even be available as an instrument to reconcile that offender to the Lord.