

Date: November 1, 2020  
Series: *Joseph – Living the Dream*  
Title: *Faithful in Forgiveness*  
Preacher: Mark Adams  
Scripture: Genesis 42-45

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In 1882 a New York City businessman named Joseph Richardson owned a narrow strip of land on Lexington Avenue. And when I say narrow, I mean narrow--it was only 5 feet wide and 104 feet long. Another businessman, Hyman Sarnar, owned a normal-sized lot behind Richardson's skinny one. Sarnar wanted to build apartments that fronted Lexington Avenue and offered Richardson \$1,000 for his skinny plot. But, Richardson was deeply offended by the size of that offer and demanded \$5,000. Sarnar refused, Richardson called Sarnar a tightwad and slammed the door on him.

Sarnar assumed the land would remain vacant and instructed his architect to design the apartment building with windows overlooking Lexington Avenue. But when Richardson saw the finished building, he resolved to block the view. No one was going to enjoy a free view over HIS lot! So, seventy-year-old Richardson built a house. Five feet wide, 104 feet long and four stories high with two suites on each floor. When it was finished, he and his wife moved into one of the suites.

Only one person at a time could go up or down the narrow stairs or pass through a narrow hallway. The largest dining table in any suite was 18 inches wide. The stoves were the very smallest made. A newspaper reporter who was fairly wide in the middle got stuck in the stairwell, and after two tenants were unsuccessful in pushing him free, they cut his clothing off and he finally popped out wearing only his skivvies.

The building was accurately dubbed the "Spite House" because that's what motivated Richardson to build it. Richardson spent the last fourteen years of his life in the narrow residence that seemed to fit his narrow state of mind. Referring to this, Max Lucado says,  
*"Revenge builds a narrow house---space enough for only one person. The lives of its tenants are reduced to one goal: make someone miserable. They do. Themselves."*

We've all spent a night or two in the "Spite house" haven't we? Some of you may have quarantined yourselves in there right now. Others are so angry at the hurts other people have caused them that they follow Richardson's example and spend the rest of their LIVES "living" there.

But there are people who are able to move away from spite because they are able to forgive not just minor infractions, but painful wounds; wounds caused by people who have intentionally hurt them deeply. Joseph is a perfect example of that kind of person, someone who as Lucado puts it, *"...moves away from the cramped world of grudge and toward the spacious ways of grace---away from hardness and toward forgiveness."*

To give you the setting of this next chapter of Joseph's life, the seven years of plenty foretold in the Pharaoh's dream have passed. Joseph has done his typical excellent work and laid aside megatons of grain. The world is in its third year of famine, so not just Egypt, but people from all nations are coming to Joseph to get food. Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 42. Keep your Bibles open as we look at the next three chapters, but let's begin by reading together the first 5 verses. And I would ask that you stand in respect for God's Word.

**Genesis 42:1-**

**42:1 - When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?"**

**2 - He continued, "I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die."**

**3 - Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt.**

**4 - But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him.**

**5 - So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also.**

So, picture what is about to happen. Joseph goes to work for another long workday of hearing and granting requests for grain. But this day is different for, as he scans the long line of hungry people who have come from around the world he sees ten of his brothers. Only his full-brother, Benjamin, is missing. His older siblings were balder and grayer, but it was them. Sweaty robes clung to their shins and road dust colored their long beards. These backwoods Hebrews must have stuck out in sophisticated Egypt like hillbillies at Times Square. I mean it is no wonder he recognized them.

But when they finally got to the head of the line, they didn't recognize Joseph. And that's understandable. First, they assumed if he was still alive, he would be a slave in some obscure part of Egypt. Plus, Joseph looked VERY Egyptian; he was clean-shaven, he wore royal robes, he spoke the language just like a native. Black makeup extended from the sides of his eyes, he wore a black wig that sat on his head like a helmet. He probably looked something like this ancient painting of a Pharaoh.

Do you know how your mind kind of freezes people in the past? When I think of my former youth, I still think of them as teens so I'm shocked when I meet one who is now in his 40's and a parent with a receding hairline and the beginnings of the "middle age spread." Well, Joseph's brothers had his 17-year-old image frozen in THEIR minds. They still thought of him as a young teen, so they didn't recognize him at 40 because, in addition to his Egyptian garb, some strange things that happen to your body between 17 and 40.

I read this week that there are three stages of life: youth, middle age, and "you're looking good." My point is he was not anything like the teen they sold into slavery. It never occurred to them that they were standing before their long-lost baby brother. I imagine Joseph got goosebumps as he saw the dream he had 23 years earlier come to life. His elder brothers were bowing down before him just as he had envisioned. He WAS ruling over them.

Now if I were Joseph, standing there that day, I would think, *"Now's my chance to get even. I've been waiting for twenty-three years to get back at these guys."* I mean, this would be my chance to build a BIG "Spite House." I would say, *"I AM JOSEPH your brother. Do you remember what you did to me?! I do---I've thought of nothing else all this time. So---sorry---you are going home empty-handed. You think I'm going to give you grain after what you did to me? Do you know the pain you have caused me? Do you have any idea what I've been through? I don't care if you starve to death. Make like some wheat chaff and blow!"*

He could have done that, or he could've enslaved them for 6 years and then thrown them into that prison for another ten so they would know what he had gone through. He could've tortured them and executed them. He had the power to do whatever he wanted to get even with his sibs. Aren't those the kinds of things we would do? I mean, most of the time when we have the opportunity to get back at people who have hurt us---we do exactly that.

I heard about an elderly man backing his old big, solid steel Lincoln Continental into a parking place in a crowded street. But before he could even start it backwards, a college student in a new tiny sports car just whipped in behind him and grabbed the space. The college student jumped out of the car laughing and said, *"Gramps! That's what you can do, when you're young and quick!"* The old man responded by putting his car in reverse and then he used it to pound that sports car until it looked like an accordion. He got out and said to the college student, *"That's what you can do when you're old and rich."*

Now we have all kinds of ways to get even with people.

- There's verbal retaliation.  
If you have verbal skills and you have sarcastic skills, you can use your words to cut your enemies into tiny pieces. And we learn to hurt people with our words like that early. Did you hear about the little boy who was misbehaving and his mother made him stand in a corner for a half hour? When she called him to supper she said, *"Now, Jimmy, I know you don't want to do it, but I want you to say the blessing."* The little boy prayed, *"Father, thank you for preparing this table in the presence of mine enemies."*
- A very common way of retaliating is to recruit opponents.  
We tell other people how terribly we've been treated. We gossip and slander and send e-mails and text

messages until we have an army of sympathizers, each of whom becomes hateful toward this person. It's like Napoleon who, when he conquered a country, would force that nation's army to fight for him.

- Sometimes we retaliate with the cold shoulder. This is especially popular in marriage. Your spouse makes you angry and you just shut up and avoid him or her. Your spouse asks you what's wrong and you say what? Right---"NOTHING" but you still withhold conversation and affection until you feel like he or she has been punished enough for what they did or didn't do. That reminds me of an angry wife who told her husband she was gonna dance on his grave. In response he went out and made legal arrangements to be buried at sea.

Well as Joseph stood there, he had the perfect opportunity to retaliate against his brothers for what they did to him, but he didn't do that. Instead he put his brothers through tests---tests designed to see if they had matured, to see if they had changed over the past two decades. You see, Joseph still loved his brothers, he missed his family, and he wanted a reconciliation that was genuine, not forced by their fear of his power over them. And these guys really had been evil. They really NEEDED to change. I mean, sons 2 and 3, Simeon and Levi, were guilty of premeditated genocide in the slaughter of the unsuspecting Shechemites. Number 1 son, Reuben, had committed fornication with his father's concubine in an attempt to secure ascendance over his father Jacob. Judah, number 4, had impregnated his daughter-in-law, Tamar, who had disguised herself as a prostitute. And all but Reuben had joined in attacking young Joseph, stripping him and beating him and throwing him in a pit, intending to kill him before following Judah's suggestion and selling him into slavery instead.

So, it was important to see if these guys had changed in the past 23 years. Joseph wondered, were they still dishonest? Were they still liars? Could they be trusted? Were they "honest men" as they claimed? I mean, if he had said, "*I'm Joseph! Before I give you any grain I need to know, are you sorry for the way you treated me?*" They'd surely say, "*Of course, we're really sorry.*" But how would he know if they were sincere? Joseph shows incredible wisdom and remarkable restraint at this point. His heart had to be pounding with emotion. He had to have a dozen questions:

- "*Is my father still alive?*"
- "*Do you treat Benjamin the way you treated me?*"
- "*What did you tell my father about my whereabouts?*"

But he withheld all those questions to give him time to make sure things were different than when he had left. I'm wondering if Dickens got his inspiration for *A Christmas Carol* from this part of Joseph's life story because like the Spirits of Christmas past, present, and future, Joseph gave his brothers an opportunity to see their sin. Joseph began by putting them through a version of what he went through when he was 17. Do you remember what his brothers accused him of when he came to check on them that day? They accused him of being a spy and reporting back to his father. So, as they kneel before him, Joseph the Prime Minister of Egypt, says, "*You didn't come here to buy grain. You came here to spy on Egypt.*" Then Joseph paid no attention to their pleas for mercy just as they had paid no attention to his pleas for mercy when he was in that pit. They said, "*Oh, no! We're not here to spy. We're just here to buy food.*" But Joseph said, "*No, you're here to spy on our land.*" In verse 13 they replied, "***Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with his father and one is no more.***"

And suddenly Joseph had the answer to his questions.

- His father was alive!
- His brother Benjamin was still alive and he was receiving favored treatment because he didn't make the trip.
- And---they'd told the father that he, Joseph, was dead.

Well, Joseph pretended not to believe them. He put them in that Egyptian underground prison for three days just as they had thrown him into that pit. Then Joseph changed his mind, at least he said he did. Actually, this was all a part of his plan. Remember when they said, "*We're going to kill him. No, we're going to throw him into a pit. No, we're going to sell him to slaves?*"

Well, Joseph allowed them to go through that same kind of uncertainty. He said, *“I’ve changed my mind. All of you can go back home except one that I’ll keep here as a hostage. But if you come back for more grain, you’ve got to bring your younger brother or there’s no food.”* Simeon was bound in their presence just as Joseph had been bound and he was kept.

Now look at verse 21 and following, so you can see the brothers’ reaction. ***“They said to one another, ‘Surely, we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come upon us.’ Reuben replied, ‘Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.’ They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep.”***

You know, the conscience is a powerful motivator. Twenty-three years later, they’re saying, *“We’re being punished by God because of what we did to Joseph.”* This reminds me of Edgar Allen Poe’s story, *The Telltale Heart*. Do any of you RAVENS fans remember it? A man committed murder and at night he couldn’t sleep because he could hear the pounding of the victim’s heart. But, it was really the pounding of his own heart. That thump, thump, thump of his heart was so disturbing that finally he had to confess his sin. For twenty-three years, these brothers had lived with the pounding of the guilt of what they had done to Joseph. For twenty years, they had tried to silence it with lies to their father. But it hadn’t worked and that’s a good thing. As long as our sins bother us, that means we still have a conscience, and the brothers apparently did.

So Joseph sent them on their way, but he took the silver that they had paid for the grain with and put it back in their sacks. When they opened the sacks there was the silver, and they were petrified. They were afraid that they would be accused of stealing the money. They were afraid of going back to Egypt, so they took their grain and silver back home to Canaan, but eventually they ran out of food again. So, they said to their father, *“We can’t go back for more grain if we don’t take Benjamin.”* And Jacob said, *“You can’t take Benjamin. I’ve lost Joseph. I’ve lost Simeon. And now you’re going to take Benjamin?”* But Judah promised to care for Benjamin and with their grain stores depleted, Jacob relented.

When they arrived in Egypt, they expected to be treated as thieves since they had taken the silver back, but instead Joseph gave them special treatment. He said to his chief steward, *“I want you to take these men to my house and we’re going to throw a banquet for them.”* When they were taken to Joseph’s home they were petrified. They thought, *“What’s this going on? We were accused of spying the last time. And with the silver in our bags they must think we are thieves.”* So they took the steward aside and they said, *“We didn’t really steal that money. It was just in our sacks.”* And the steward said, *“Relax. God gave you that money. Don’t worry about it.”* When Joseph came home at noontime, the brothers nervously bowed down before them and presented gifts that they had brought from Canaan. Joseph asked, *“How is your aged father? Is he well?”* *“Oh, yes, he’s doing fine,”* they said. Then he walked over to Benjamin and he said, *“Is this your younger brother? God be gracious to you, my son.”* The Bible says, ***“Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep.”*** He went into his private room and wept there. After he had washed his face, he came out and controlling himself he said, ***“Serve the food.”***

Now the banquet was really interesting. Joseph stayed in the next room and listened in on their conversation. He had arranged the brothers around the table in the order of their birth, and with an attentive ear Joseph heard that they were dumbfounded that he could do that. Then when it came time to eat, Joseph arranged that Benjamin get five times as much food as the other brothers. But, his brothers were not critical. They were not resentful. Joseph thought, *“Maybe they have changed!”* After the meal, Joseph sent all of them on their way including Simeon. He gave them grain, and they took off toward home ecstatic. They had succeeded.

But before they hit the city limits, they were stopped by Joseph’s guards. The guards said, *“How could you return evil for good? Joseph does all this for you and now you steal his favorite cup from the palace.”* They said, *“We did not steal anything! If you find that cup on our person, we’ll all be your slaves and you can execute the one in whose sack you find the cup.”*

The Bible says they began at the sack of the oldest and they worked their way down. Joseph had planted his silver cup in the sack of his brother Benjamin. They dug down into that sack, and to the horror of the brothers, they pulled up that

silver cup. The guards said, *“The rest of you can go home. This boy stays.”* They could have all went home, but they said, *“No way. We’re not leaving Benjamin here.”* When they stood before Joseph Judah made an impassioned plea. He says to Joseph, *“Sir, we cannot go back without our brother Benjamin. He is our father’s favorite son. If we go back without him, our father will die. You see, our father had another son who was his favorite and he is no more, and it crushed our father. If we go back without Benjamin, I cannot bear to see the anguish on his face, and he will die. Sir, I have a proposal. Would you consider letting me take Benjamin’s place and letting the boy go back home?”*

Years later, there would be one come from the tribe of Judah named Jesus who would come and offer to be a substitute for the sins of His brethren---that they might be free from the slavery of sin. Judah said, *“Release Benjamin. Execute me.”* The brothers HAD changed! Look at chapter 45 beginning with verse 1. *“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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.”*

The brothers were dumbfounded. Why was this Egyptian weeping so profusely? In verse 3, Joseph regained his composure enough to talk in Hebrew and say, *“I am Joseph. Is my father still living?”* And then they saw it, they knew it was him and they were terrified. Can you imagine what it’s going to be like for some people someday to stand before Jesus Christ, the One they’ve ridiculed, Whose name they’ve used in vain, the One they’ve disbelieved raised from the dead? And one day He says, *“I’m Jesus.”* No wonder every knee is going to bow!

Then in verse 4 of chapter 44 Joseph makes an incredible statement to his brothers. Joseph said, *“Come close to me. I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. Now don’t be distressed and don’t be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”* Verse 14, *“Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.”*

What a great reconciliation! Well, how can we get to that in our own disputes? Joseph would say:

**1.) First, you must RELEASE the offender.**

Joseph had been mistreated; now he had an opportunity to retaliate and he did not do it. Forgiving someone means following his example. It’s saying, *“I will not exercise my right to get back at you. I forgive you.”*

**2.) Second, REPAY wrong with kindness.**

In Genesis 44:9-11 he said, *“Come down to me; don’t delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me...I will provide for you there...”* It seems outrageous to do good to someone who has gone out of their way to do harm to you, but that is exactly what God has called us to do. Remember, Jesus was beaten, mocked, and spat upon, even though he had done nothing worthy of such treatment. And while he was hanging on a cross he didn’t deserve to bear, he said, *“Father forgive them.”* We are to do the same with those who hurt us. We are not to treat them the way they treated us, we are to treat them the way JESUS treated us.

**3.) Finally, RECOGNIZE the sovereignty of God.**

Joseph said, *“You meant it for evil but God turned it around for good.”*

Forgiveness is really reaching maturity when we can look back on an injustice and say, *“God saw me through and I grew through it and maybe...maybe it’s the best thing.”* In Joseph’s case, it took twenty years to understand and say that, but that’s when forgiveness, I think, is complete.

LET US PRAY