

True Forgiveness Genesis 45:4–24

Forgiveness. Sounds simple enough, right? Not really. It can bother us and make us anxious. It can make us angry. It can be hard to receive it, although it's probably easier to receive than to give.

All of us can name someone we've had to forgive or probably should forgive. And I'm sure you can recall a specific time when you needed someone's forgiveness.

There's a kind of burden in not being forgiven. The late British pastor and theologian John Stott makes this point in one of his books, repeating a statement about forgiveness from a prominent atheist, of all people. Her name was Marghanita Laski. She was a well-known journalist and author, and very outspoken about her firm disbelief in God.

But Dr. Stott says that not long before she died, Laski said this in a TV interview: *"What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me."* Nobody to set her free from what she had done or left undone.

It's very freeing to be forgiven, to have your debts canceled. It's also freeing to forgive – to move past bitterness and let go of a grudge. And where there's unforgiveness, there's always division. There's a wall or a distance, especially when the offense still hurts. We don't easily forgive those who have hurt us the most, do we?

But unforgiveness puts us in opposition to God. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, *"If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

Here's a statement from TableTalk magazine explaining what Jesus means. The author writes, *"Our Savior warns us that those who are unwilling to forgive others have not understood the free grace of the Lord and therefore may not be true disciples."*

Forgiveness is like a litmus test. It shows our understanding of God's grace. Any unwillingness we have to forgive should cause us to examine the state of our souls. So, unforgiveness shines a spotlight on our need for God's grace.

But the good news of the gospel is that God supplies that grace through Christ. And He supplies it in abundance. There's more than enough forgiveness in and through Jesus. He not only earned that forgiveness for his people – He makes us able to forgive others.

Jesus is not only our model of forgiveness; He's our source of strength to forgive. Jesus is our means of true forgiveness, because as we behold Him, we know God more. And as we know God more, His grace makes us stronger, His love puts us at ease, and He produces within us the desire and the power to truly forgive.

As we truly see Jesus, we are filled with the comfort of God's forgiveness and love, and then we have forgiveness and, yes, even love, to give to others.

But how does that work? What happens within us as we behold Jesus that would give us the strength to extend true forgiveness to those who have hurt us? The answer lies in the characteristics of true forgiveness.

Genesis 45 presents two of them. Two characteristics. You can see them stated on pg. 6 and 7 in the WG. True forgiveness is based on God's sovereignty and satisfied with God's justice. True forgiveness is completely God-centered. And for that reason, we shouldn't expect it to come naturally to us. That's why we resist giving it.

In our own strength we may produce something that resembles true forgiveness, but when subjected to God's standard, it will fall short. And again, to Jesus' point in Matthew 6, true forgiveness is a big deal to God – not just His forgiveness toward us, but ours toward each other. So look with me now at these events in Genesis 45 more closely.

Everything from here to the end of Genesis is what we might call "falling action." The high point in these events was Joseph revealing his identity to his brothers. But what comes after is just as important because of what we learn about God, and about the work of Christ, and about forgiveness.

His brothers now know that Joseph is the Egyptian governor and the controller of the food. They had sold him into slavery years earlier, jealous of their father's favoritism toward him and angry at Joseph's potential authority over them in the future. They got rid of him and faked his death.

But now, after years of servitude and imprisonment, Joseph is on top. His brothers, like all the people at that time, came to Egypt to buy food during the famine. But Joseph didn't reveal himself right away. He tested them to see if they had changed. Now he sees their regret and he tells them the truth.

They were stunned and apparently they were afraid that he would exact vengeance. But notice what he says to them in verse [5], *"Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life."* Joseph is not stuck on blaming them. Why?

God had given dreams to the Egyptian Pharaoh which Joseph was able to interpret. Joseph was then installed to oversee preparation for the famine and distribution of the food. There was no normal way that a Hebrew would have this position of power in Egypt.

So Egypt had saved food for years, and they had enough to eat and to sell. And through these events, God furthered His promise to Joseph's great grandfather Abraham. God had made a covenant of grace with Abraham. A nation would come from him and his wife. The covenant

family had grown over two generations, but the famine put them in danger. Joseph says that God sent him to Egypt to save the covenant family from starvation. The brothers had evil intentions toward Joseph when they sold him as a slave, but God was working His good plans through their evil.

When you go through difficult times, especially as a result of wrong done to you by someone, God's providence is often not clear right away. What they did to Joseph was awful. Genesis 42 says he begged for his life. He didn't go quietly into captivity, rejoicing in the will of God. He was hurt and afraid. But now, he's forgiven his brothers because he sees the hand of God at work.

Look at verse 7, he says, *"And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."* They would be a "remnant" or remainder of the covenant family that would flourish and continue to grow in number. Joseph was convinced that even as he was carried away from home and mistreated and held captive that God was involved, verse [8], *"So it was not you who sent me here, but God."* This is true forgiveness 20 years in the making.

During that time, through ups and downs, Joseph came to understand the sovereignty of God in all things. In other words, that God is in control of all He has made and always working out His good plans. Joseph came to see that God is always with His people, leading and guiding them, even in the darkness, even in the danger. God preserves and governs all His creatures and all their actions with holiness, wisdom and power because He alone is King of all.

Joseph's ability to forgive such a heinous offense was based on God's sovereignty. And this is our first lesson about true forgiveness. True forgiveness involves coming to terms with the things that have happened in your life, recognizing that it was all under God's control as He worked out His plans for you.

True forgiveness is being able to say to someone who has hurt you deeply, even as the hurt lingers, *"I know you had your reasons, but God had His reasons too. God has His plans, so I'm not going to hold against you what you did, because God had a purpose in it all."*

This echoes later in chapter 50. After their father Jacob dies, the brothers fear that Joseph will then punish them. However, Joseph says to them, *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."*

Will you begin to come to terms with God's control over what has happened in your life? Can you accept that God not only allowed but that He was willfully working through the evil deeds of people to accomplish His good and holy will? You can't naturally accept this. You have to behold Jesus more and more to believe it.

You might wonder, *"Well then how did Joseph change then, since he lived long before the coming of Christ into the world?"* Joseph didn't know the name of Jesus, but He knew the grace and sovereignty of the covenant God of Abraham. Not just a head knowledge, but a heart

knowledge as well. And with that, God set him free to forgive his brothers. God transformed Joseph within. And He will transform us. It's a process, it takes time (as it did with Joseph), but God will do it.

Now, in these next verses, Joseph tells his brothers to go to their father Jacob, tell him that he's alive, and also, to bring their families and all they have to Egypt. There were still five years of famine to come, but Joseph would provide for all the family. Look at the outward evidence of forgiveness in verse [15], *"he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him."*

Pharaoh learns about the reunion, and notice verse [17], *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your beasts and go back to the land of Canaan, and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall eat the fat of the land.'" The choicest part. The richness! This is repeated in verse 20. Joseph showers his brothers with gifts, then Pharaoh promises them the very best.*

But here's a question: does that sound like justice to you? Is that a fitting reward for these brothers in light of what they had done to Joseph years earlier?

When Pharaoh heard that these were Joseph's brothers, he gladly made this offer to them. After all, without Joseph, Egypt would be suffering too. But what if Joseph held a grudge and said to Pharaoh, *"Let me tell you what they did to me. Let me tell you about the pain they caused me. They need to pay."* I imagine Pharaoh would have destroyed them without delay. The enemy of Pharaoh's right hand man was the enemy of Pharaoh himself.

But it was God's will that the brothers and all the family would be preserved in Egypt. Joseph accepted that, so he didn't get revenge, though he could have. He understood what God would later verbalize to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy. God tells them, *"Vengeance is mine; I will repay."* Retribution belongs to the Lord.

This is our second lesson about true forgiveness. It doesn't demand payment of some kind. It doesn't seek man-centered justice. True forgiveness is satisfied with God's justice.

Joseph is even concerned that his brothers see it this way as well. Look at verse [24], *"Then he sent his brothers away, and as they departed, he said to them, 'Do not quarrel on the way.'" They didn't need to start pointing fingers and playing the blame game. They needed to recognize God's sovereignty over what they did and just be amazed at the grace of God toward them.*

William Shakespeare wrote many famous plays, one called *The Merchant of Venice*. In the play, Shakespeare coined a phrase that we still use today. In one scene, a man approaches another wanting to borrow money for his friend. The man with the money says he will make the loan, but if it's not repaid on time, he will demand from the borrower *"a pound of flesh"* – to cut from him one pound of his body.

What the play reveals is that this requirement is about more than just the money. It's about deep-seated vengeance and bitterness. The man holds a grudge. He has in mind what he feels is justice for how he has been wronged.

Search your heart. Is there someone from whom you want "a pound of flesh?" You may have a legitimate case. I know that circumstances are often complicated, and many people here among us have been subjected to terrible things by others.

By no means am I dismissing or minimizing what has been done to you. Nor am I saying that you should allow mistreatment to continue unchecked or unchallenged. But I am saying that unforgiveness is rooted in revenge. It's not satisfied with trusting Jesus' call to forgive and leaving justice to God. We harbor unforgiveness because we have some other kind of justice in mind.

To be sure, your hurt is absolutely real, and in cases where laws have been broken, perpetrators should be brought to justice. But you don't need to make someone pay. God will repay. God will do what is just, and true forgiveness is satisfied with His justice.

This means husbands and wives must forgive and move toward each other with grace. Siblings, friends, church members, family – you must forgive and show grace. Unforgiveness can manifest itself in many ways. He may result in coldness toward the person, or cutting off the relationship altogether. Your unforgiveness may result in you distancing yourself, or you may mistreat the person. Or you might be intentional to show mild disdain for them. You may do things to feel like you're getting even, to feel like you're getting justice.

Grace toward them, on the other hand, might not feel like justice. But the grace God has shown you in Christ shouldn't feel like justice either. It's undeserved, and if you think you deserve God's grace, you don't understand it at all.

I've said many times that the consistent message of Joseph's life has been how he foreshadowed Jesus Christ. Their experiences parallel one another, Jesus' of course being greater. The forgiveness Joseph extends points to the greater forgiveness that Jesus extends.

The model of true forgiveness is not Joseph. It's Jesus.

His ability to live a sinless life and die a sinner's death was based on God's sovereignty. He endured mistreatment, torture, and death because He was satisfied with God's justice. It is Jesus whom we need to see.

Without a constant and growing focus on who He is and what He's done, we won't truly forgive. Without a focus on Him, real spiritual growth cannot actually happen. Maybe you've seen this and been confused or frustrated by it. People can clean up their outward behavior in some ways. They may learn to say many right things and abstain from many wrong things. But they

don't truly forgive. They don't display the peace or the love that a Christian ought to. Why is that?

It's because true internal change is a Christ-centered endeavor. Man-centered living and worship and preaching, man-centered Bible reading and prayer and service for God only produces what man can produce. We are only changed from one degree of glory to another by the Holy Spirit as we behold the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts and minds. Paul tells us that in 2 Cor. 3.

If we are not looking continually to Christ, intent on applying His gospel, we will walk around with so many grudges. We will long to make people pay for their sins. This includes people we know and people we don't know.

Even as we struggle against those who oppose the Christian faith – the companies, and activists, and politicians, and celebrities, the authors and speakers – we must look at them as Christ looked at those who crucified him, and say, in our hearts, *“Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.”* A heart transformed by Christ pities the foolish sinner.

Have your eyes drifted from Jesus, focusing instead on your hurt? Has your view of Jesus been clouded by bitterness, or anger, or a desire for revenge?

Have you humbled yourself as a sinner before God and trusted in Jesus Christ? In Christ, God does not give us what we deserve – He gives us what Christ deserves.

Receive that gift today. Be set free by true forgiveness.

Let's bow in prayer together.