

# Key Events in Our History – The Forgiving Saint

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Genesis 40 – 55

Joseph is the central figure God would use to move Jacob and his family to Egypt. It was in Egypt where Israel would dramatically increase in numbers and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to become a great nation would make great progress. There are a number of themes that can be developed from the life of Joseph and his family. One that stands out is the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation. Last week I highlighted bitterness and noted that we must set it aside. We need to do away with bitterness. Forgiveness is key to setting aside bitterness. Forgiveness is a huge topic and has many facets to it, hence this is but an overview.

## When To Forgive

By the time Joseph was 30 years old he faced a number of major incidents where he had to deal with forgiving people for what they had done to him, which included:

1. The hatred by his brothers which is summed up in

**Genesis 37:4 (ESV)** But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

His brothers longed for the affirmation Joseph received from their father Jacob. Rather than make changes to gain their father's affirmation or discuss the matter with him, they took out their disappointment on Joseph. So much so that they couldn't even speak to Joseph in a civil manner.

2. Their hatred towards Joseph escalated to the point that they sold Joseph into slavery.
3. Things turned out better for Joseph than one may have expected when he was bought by Potiphar as a slave. Potiphar quickly recognized Joseph's abilities and maturity and put him in charge of his house. However, when Joseph spurned the advances of Potiphar's wife, she falsely accused him and he ended up in prison being accused of the very thing he refused to do.
4. After spending what were likely years in prison Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of pharaoh's servants. Joseph appealed to the cupbearer to mention him to pharaoh and rescue him from his trouble.

**Genesis 40:14–15 (ESV)**<sup>14</sup> Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. <sup>15</sup> For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit.”

Sadly for Joseph, despite his kindness towards the chief cupbearer, once he was restored to his position, he forgot Joseph and two more years in prison elapsed (40.23).

Joseph was confronted with forgiving people not just on trivial or minor matters, but on things which had severe consequences for him. It is easy to dismiss the dynamics of what Joseph faced when we look at them in the context of how things ended, but Joseph did not know when he faced those misdeeds and acts of treachery how things would end. He needed to decide at the time how he would respond to what had happened. What would he think about and where would he focus?

None of us will face the atrocities or betrayals Joseph did; however, everyone is hurt in one manner or another. None are immune to the offences of another. All people will encounter some disappointment along the way. We encounter things that don't turn out in the manner we had thought, hoped, or expected they would and sometimes that is the case because of someone's decisions. Offences generally happen most among people we spend more time with; hence offences often involve fellow believers. It is not unusual for people to be offended by a friend. In marriages and families people are hurt not only by those they love, but love deeply.

All of us are faced with responding to offences. It may be some hurtful words spoken to us, or about us. With the rise of the internet and social media people can lash out at others under the cloud of anonymity, and many do. The disparaging and malicious comments some people make about public figures they disagree with is deplorable. Offences may result from being embarrassed or ridiculed by another. They can happen when a person is overlooked while others less deserving are acknowledged. Offences understandably occur when people are treated unfairly or when bullied. There are plenty of reports of bullying of children and young people at school, though it also happens to adults in the workplace. Many of us have met people who are the victims of a tragedy caused by another. Imagine if you were the parent of one of the hockey players from Humboldt killed or injured in the bus crash nearly 3 years ago? Or consider the responses of those who survived and are left severely handicapped all because of the inattentiveness of a truck driver? The issue of forgiveness for them is very real. Some have to deal with the betrayal of a trusted friend or a spouse. The variety of reasons where people need to forgive is endless. The list sometimes includes a willingness to forgive God when He didn't intervene in the manner that would have prevented a painful experience or tragedy. As an aside, none of us know how many times God has intervened on our behalf and prevented some calamity. We are only aware of the times He didn't. Sometimes people need to forgive themselves for what they did or didn't do. It may focus on a poor choice that has had long term negative consequences.

In recent years many of the abuses perpetrated on children and youth, sometimes under the banner of religion, have come to light. Young girls and women have particularly been victimized and abused. When abused children and youth grow up they don't simply leave the tragedy behind. Abuse victims must deal with a number of issues and recovery is often lengthy and difficult. Among the issues they must address is forgiveness. Sometimes the abuse they faced is horrific and beyond imagination; the

abuser certainly doesn't deserve to be forgiven and the scars left behind are usually deep and painful.

## Forgiveness Modeled by Joseph

Returning back to the account of Joseph, it is conceivable Joseph may have initially nursed a few thoughts of ill will towards his offenders, but if he did, he quickly changed his focus to the future rather than on the past. Rather than dwell on the injustices he experienced and be held in the grip of unforgiveness and bitterness as his brothers were and which culminated in their diabolical plot against him, he would forgive his brothers and do the best he could with what lay ahead. It was likely a few years later when Joseph's steadfastness and willingness to forgive was once again tested when he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and ended up in prison and needed to forgive her for her treachery. If Joseph was 17 (37.2) when he was sold by his brothers, a total of about 13 years elapsed until pharaoh gave him a position of authority in Egypt (41.46). Those were enough years to become mired in the mud of endless rehearsals of how he had been wronged and how he would get even if the chance ever arrived. There is no record of Joseph dealing with pharaoh's cupbearer for forgetting him in prison, nor of him settling the score with Potiphar's wife. But there is evidence of his forgiveness of his brothers. It is true Joseph toyed with them when they arrived in Egypt seeking food, but when he told them who he was, he assured them he held no grudge against them.

**Genesis 45:4–8 (ESV)** 4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph's brothers had born the guilt of their treachery for 22 years. Their guilt was at the forefront of their memories. They vividly remembered that day; it still haunted them as though it was yesterday.

**Genesis 42:21–22 (ESV)** 21 Then they said 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." 22 And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."

It is no wonder when Joseph revealed himself to them they were speechless. They were dumbfounded!

**Genesis 45:3 (ESV)** And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

They knew what they would do if the tables were turned. Joseph on the other hand saw all of this in the context of God's will to preserve His people during the famine. Joseph's assurances to his brothers flowed from within his heart where years earlier he had forgiven his brothers.

## What Is Forgiveness

My online Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives these synonyms for *forgiveness*: *absolution, amnesty, pardon, remission, and remittal*. All those words convey the concept of wiping the slate clean, or of *letting someone off the hook*. *Forgiveness* is letting go of the past; it is cancelling our demands on the past. It is giving people a *pass*. *Forgiveness* means surrendering ill will, vengeance, and bitterness against another for something they did, or said, or didn't say, or didn't do. It means cancelling all expectations we may have had from the person who offended us. If there are injustices we thought should have been addressed, when we forgive a person we fully turn the matter over to the Lord. We leave the disposition of it with Him and transfer responsibility for handling it to Him.

Forgiveness begins with a decision we make. It is a choice we exercise; it is something we choose. It may be good to remind ourselves that when we offend someone or fail, we want to be forgiven, even when we don't deserve it. However, we often struggle with forgiving others. Forgiveness goes against our natural inclination. The truth is, forgiveness is another area where we need supernatural help. It is one of the marks of being born-again. It ought to be a distinguishing characteristic of the people of God. We of all people on earth know what it is to be forgiven, hence we ought to be willing to forgive others. Paul gave this direction to the believers at Colossae,

**Colossians 3:12–13 (ESV)** 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, **forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.**

Forgiving others is something we choose to do. It requires God's grace and His enabling power to let go of an offense and leave it with Him. Especially so when the offense is great. It takes it off our shoulders and puts it on His. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean we agree with the offender or that his or her actions were acceptable. Nor does it mean that he or she deserves to be forgiven. It doesn't necessarily negate all the consequences an offender may face. There will be many offenders who escape any penalty for their offenses on earth but will not be so fortunate when they stand before God and face His judgement. Since God knows all things and is sovereign and just, we can leave justice with Him. The important thing is for the offended person to experience closure.

It is important to understand that forgiveness is something we can do, and need to do, irrespective of what the offender does, or doesn't do. Forgiveness does not require any participation by the person who is forgiven. For example, Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery more than two decades before he encountered them face to face. Similarly, in the case of Potiphar's wife and the cupbearer, it is very unlikely Joseph would have had any contact with either while he languished in prison, yet

every indication is that he forgave them and pressed forward victoriously. While it may be preferable, forgiveness does not require participation by a person who has hurt or offended us in order for us to forgive them. We follow this practice of forgiving people without their knowledge or participation all the time. For example, someone may make a remark to you that you take some offense to. Perhaps the person who offended you chose his or her words carelessly, or perhaps he or she knowingly and intentionally made a hurtful remark to you. Perhaps the words were well intended but didn't come out that way. While offended by the remark, as you reflect on it, you conclude that nothing beneficial will come from pursuing it and you choose to dismiss it and with God's grace, you do. You simply follow the Biblical injunction *to bear with one another and forgive one another* (Col 3.13). You treat it as though it never happened. In most cases the offender knows nothing of the offense, nor the choice you made to forgive him or her. Forgiveness is a choice we make and which we carry out with the Lord's enabling strength and grace. We forgive, because He first forgave us.

Forgiveness is far more than just uttering the words, "*I forgive you.*" It is something that we need to own in the depth of our being. In the *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant* Jesus emphasized the need to fully forgive others by concluding with the statement,

**Matthew 18:35** (ESV) So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not **forgive your brother from your heart.**"

True forgiveness proceeds from our hearts, from the essence of who we are. It is often initiated by the Holy Spirit impressing upon us the need to forgive someone because that is God's message to us in His Word. Or it may result from doing an inventory of our lives and discovering as the Lord searches our hearts that unforgiveness for a specific offense is taking control of us. Perhaps it becomes apparent that our thoughts regularly center on where we are offended, that we have become preoccupied with it. As we allow the Holy Spirit to move in our heart and renew our minds with God's truth. We come to the place where we realize we must forgive or we will be paralyzed. In many cases it is not easy to let go, but as we read God's Word are reminded of His enabling strength and the enormity of His power to do so, we press forward with forgiveness. In some cases it may take months to process what has happened and gain release. True forgiveness is genuine; it is also all encompassing. Cancelling our claim on the past essentially means treating it as though it had not happened. That is how the Lord treats us. He says of His children,

**Psalms 103:11–12** (ESV) 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 **as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.**

In emphasizing Christ's once for all sacrifice on the cross, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes from **Jeremiah 31.34** and points out,

**Hebrews 10:17** (ESV) then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Since God is omniscient (all knowing), it doesn't mean that God doesn't actually remember the sins we committed, rather He has chosen to no longer take them into account. That is the pattern He models for us. Where we have been the victim of a serious offense, despite completely forgiving the offender, it is unlikely it will be wiped from our memory. But as we experience God's enabling grace and strength to move beyond it, it will be like a broken arm, even though it is fully healed, we will still remember breaking it.

## Why Forgive

The Bible makes it very clear that as followers of Jesus who have been forgiven, forgiveness ought to characterize us.

**Matthew 6:14–15** (ESV) 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

**Mark 11:25** (ESV) And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

**Colossians 3:13** (ESV) bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Let us keep in the forefront of our minds that God gladly forgives us, even though we don't deserve it. It is totally by His grace. He forgives us despite our sins and our ongoing failures. We are comforted by the truth expressed in 1 John 1.9.

**1 John 1:9** (ESV) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We are relieved that He doesn't bring out the endless list of our many sins. Rather, He has forgiven us and He welcomes us before His throne of grace.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** (ESV) For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

**Ephesians 3:11–12** (ESV) 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 **in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.**

Not only does the Bible make it clear we need to forgive others, but it is also for our good. That is always the case when obeying God's will. Unforgiveness takes control of people's lives and buries them in a sea of bitterness. Unforgiveness can be completely debilitating. People are not only rendered ineffective in using their gifts as believers, but their personal lives and relationships with others suffer as well.

Satan and those who serve him delight in people being immobilized by an offense of another; a refusal to forgive until they come groveling to our doorstep. And even then

to only offer conditional forgiveness. I have seen too many people sidelined by unforgiveness. I am reminded of some who have shared with me some of their grievances. I have had people recite the details of who and what offended them with such vivid detail that it sounded like it happened only a few days earlier. However, that often wasn't the case at all. I recall one instance where I was already thinking about how I would address the matter with the "offender" when it became clear from the details that the issue happened 20 years earlier. Nevertheless, it was fresh in that man's mind; he had rehearsed it over and over again and it shaped how he viewed the person who offended him and it controlled his responses. In some cases an offended person won't let go even though the person who offended them has sought forgiveness and tried to resolve the matter. It is also not uncommon for the person who has committed an offense against another to not even know they have done so.

## **Practicing Forgiveness**

Many of the things for which we forgive others, or need to forgive others are relatively minor and aren't of major significance, unlike the offenses Joseph faced. It is critical for people to carefully evaluate an offense that troubles them and proceed appropriately. In most cases we simply need to forgive others and move on. In other cases we need to follow the direction the Bible gives to approach the person and seek resolution. The Bible outlines the steps to follow. Sometimes it is necessary to involve someone to mediate the process and work through it. It can become a lengthy process at times, but resolution is worth it. I will discuss that more fully in the next message on Joseph.

However, sometimes people refuse to forgive even when it involves relatively minor issues. I encourage people to consider carefully the hills worth dying on. I have seen far too many people sever relationships over something that certainly didn't merit a fractured relationship. Seldom is it over a key doctrinal truth. Over the years I have watched Christians leave and divide Churches over relatively minor matters that had grown into walls of division. In just the last couple of weeks I have talked with people in two Churches elsewhere in Canada where people are unwilling to forgive and accept apologies and pleas for forgiveness, but persist in their pursuit of division.

I don't want to suggest for a moment people never face hurts or offences or encounter loss which is very great or where forgiveness is very difficult. People sometimes face horrendous situations. I have drawn attention to victims of abuse which is especially difficult to victoriously survive. It is undoubtedly a place where God's supernatural work is especially needed and where an abundance of grace is required. Forgiveness in situations like that is not easy. It reaches down to the depth of the person. There are many other places where forgiveness is particularly challenging. I think of people whose spouses had affairs and brought untold grief upon their family. Or people who are victims of a drunk driver who walked away from a crash while they were left with lifelong injuries or a loved one is dead. One doesn't need to listen very long to the news to hear of innocent children, youth, and adults gunned down as collateral damage in some gang gun fight. The list of pain goes on and on.

Where the pain is great, forgiveness is far more encompassing than a glib, "*I forgive him,*" or "*I forgive her.*" It takes time for people to process what has happened and

experience God's work in their lives and bring them to a place of release and a willingness to forgive. Supernatural enablement is essential for forgiveness to be extended from the depth of one's heart and victoriously move on. Forgiveness is sometimes progressive where the offense has been great. There is a process as God strengthens the offended person with His power by His Spirit deep within. Our enemy wants to bury people with unforgiveness and bitterness. However, God not only desires that His children aren't consumed by unforgiveness, but He provides a way for them to navigate through the hurt and pain in His strength. He wants us to leave the issue with Him and He will deal with it according to His sovereign will.

Perhaps an illustration helps in the matter of forgiveness. Suppose you are the owner of a priceless vase which has been passed down to you from your mother, who received it from her mother. Not only does it have material value, but more importantly it has intrinsic sentimental value. One day a friend of yours is visiting you and you tell him about your china vase. Your friend, who has some knowledge of fine china, expresses a particular interest in your vase. You are thrilled and so you carefully get it from your china cabinet and bring it to show your friend. He admires the intricate detail and notes how exquisitely it has been hand painted and as he turns it over in his hand to look at it more closely, it slips out of his hand and crashes to the floor where it is shattered into a thousand pieces. Your friend is profuse in his apologies and pleas for forgiveness and offers whatever he can to repay you. Your heart is as shattered as the pieces of the vase on the floor. Even if it was possible to buy a similar vase, it still wouldn't be "*that vase*". In that instant as you are overcome with grief you are also faced with a choice, "*Will you forgive your friend?*" If you choose to not forgive him, it still won't bring the vase back. Despite the fact that you will always remember that vase, and wish you still had it, this is one of those places where you need to rely upon the grace of God to enable you to not only verbalize your forgiveness, but experience God's enabling strength and His inexhaustible grace to let go of something that was precious to you and press forward in victory. Not only will you need God's grace as you sweep up the shattered pieces from your kitchen floor, but in the future when you look at the empty space in your china cabinet or wish you could pass it on to your daughter.

Forgiveness doesn't change the past; no one can do that – not even God! Forgiveness changes how we view the past. Forgiveness means letting go and pressing forward confident that God's grace will prove sufficient.

Perhaps you will be ministered by the following song, **Wonderful, Merciful Savior**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8T0br5JfAA&list=RDz8T0br5JfAA&start\\_radio=1&t=7&ab\\_channel=GettyMusicVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8T0br5JfAA&list=RDz8T0br5JfAA&start_radio=1&t=7&ab_channel=GettyMusicVEVO)