

# Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Genesis 40 -50

A pivotal individual in the history of God's people is Joseph. He was 1 of the 12 sons of Jacob and is pivotal because he was central in Jacob and his family moving from Canaan to Egypt. In previous messages I addressed Jacob's choice of Joseph as his favorite son. That choice fostered the resentment of Joseph's brothers towards Joseph. It culminated with Joseph's brothers selling him as a slave to a group of Midianites on their way to Egypt who in turn sold Joseph to Potiphar, one of pharaoh's captains.

Rather than yielding to an attitude of unforgiveness which would have paralyzed Joseph with bitterness, Joseph chose instead to forgive his brothers and trust God with his future and make the best of it in God's strength. Potiphar quickly recognized Joseph's leadership ability and integrity and put Joseph in charge of his entire household. However, when Joseph spurned the advances of Potiphar's wife, she falsely accused Joseph and he ended up imprisoned for years for the very thing he refused to do. Despite a second betrayal, Joseph continued to trust the Lord. In prison Joseph stood out from the other prisoners and was given oversight of the other prisoners. In the course of time Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of pharaoh's servants who had been imprisoned. Despite Joseph asking the cup bearer to remember him when he was returned to pharaoh's service and to ask pharaoh to intervene for him, the cupbearer ignored Joseph's request and 2 more years passed. Most would have understood if Joseph had grown bitter and spent his time plotting revenge if he was ever given the opportunity. It would not have been surprising if he had chosen to wallow in a sea of self-pity. If Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery when he was still 17, then Joseph spent a total of 13 years in prison. Nevertheless, Scripture conveys Joseph had forgiven all who had wronged him. Some might argue that Joseph did so because everything turned out very good for him, yet the implication of the Biblical account is that Joseph forgave his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer from the outset.

The life of Joseph provides insight into the themes of *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. For that reason I have paused in our overview of key historical events from creation to the entrance of God's people into Canaan to glean some important and very practical truths to follow when we are offended, or offend others.

## Forgiveness

*Forgiveness* entails letting go of the past. It means surrendering ill will, vengeance, and bitterness towards another for what they said or did, or what they didn't say, or didn't do. It means cancelling our demands on the past. It is essentially letting the person, or persons, *off the hook*. It is transferring the responsibility for any consequences to God; putting it in His hands. That is certainly what Joseph did with his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer. There is no evidence of any retaliation by Joseph against his brothers, nor the other two. Forgiveness transfers the matter from our shoulders and to the Lord and leaves the disposition with Him. Hence, it doesn't necessarily absolve an offender from consequences; but it relinquishes our responsibility for it.

Choosing not to forgive someone comes with great peril. The offended person typically continues to rehearse what happened over and over again. They can become consumed with the past event as it dominates their thoughts and controls their responses. It provides the seed bed for bitterness to not only sprout, but to grow and infect their life. And just as the Bible warns (Heb 12.15), it often spills over into the lives of others. Hence, not only do we need to forgive others because that is what God directs us to do, but it is also for our good and that of others.

**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.

Forgiveness is first and foremost a decision we make; it is a choice we exercise. It is following the admonition of Scripture to forgive others just as Christ has forgiven us. Forgiveness goes against our inclination; our tendency is to make people pay for their wrongdoing, to not *let them off the hook*. However, one of the distinctives of Christians is to forgive others, just like we have been forgiven even though we didn't deserve it. While forgiveness begins with a choice, the Lord supernaturally enables us to follow through in His strength. As we choose to forgive, pray about doing so, reflect on Scripture's admonition, He, by His Spirit, moves upon our heart and renews our mind with an attitude of forgiveness towards the offender.

An important distinctive of *forgiveness* is it is something we can do irrespective of the involvement of the offender. Joseph is a good example of that. He had no contact with any of those who wronged him until years after the offenses took place; however, long before that opportunity, Joseph had forgiven them. This is an important point because many times people are unable to address an offense with the person who wronged them. It may be that the person refuses to meet, or he/she doesn't believe they did anything that needs to be addressed, or in some cases what they did is something they actually intended to do, hence they are glad you were offended, and they have no interest in any discussion about forgiveness. Where the offense is something that happened years ago, the offended person may have no way to contact the person who hurt them and in some cases the person is dead. Hence, we need to understand that we can forgive people, and need to forgive people even when we cannot interact with them. In so many cases where a person refuses to forgive someone and move on, they are the one who is hurt rather than the offender. They are the one who becomes paralyzed by unforgiveness and held in the unrelenting grip of bitterness. People need release from that. The way to do so is to follow Scripture's direction and forgive others.

We are all aware that sometimes people have been hurt in the most horrific manner. Tragically, many people are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Situations like that evoke extremely painful memories, may have profound impact on the victim and usually can only be dealt with over a considerable period of time and require the involvement of Godly, competent, and experienced people who come alongside the victim and help them through the ordeal and help them find victory in the Lord.

On the other hand most of the offences people face are relatively minor. Likely in the majority of instances, the offended person realizes very quickly that the matter they are offended over is something they can readily forgive the person who offended them and move on. Sometimes all

it takes is a good night's sleep and a few deep breathes. After some reflection and prayer, they may conclude the matter doesn't necessitate involving the other party or that raising the issue with the person who offended them is much more likely to escalate the matter and erode the very peace they are seeking. In those cases the offended person needs to choose to forgive the individual and move on. It is so important to actually let go of the issue because it may very well involve someone we will encounter regularly. It could be a family member, perhaps a spouse, or it could be someone who is a part of your Church, maybe someone who you are involved with in ministry. Forgiveness in situations like that is surely envisioned in the following admonition.

**Ephesians 4:32** (ESV) Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ken Sande, former president of *Peacemaker Ministries*, lists 4 promises of forgiveness a person makes when they forgive another:

1. I will not think about this incident.
2. I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.
3. I will not talk to others about this incident.
4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.<sup>1</sup>

These points are beneficial in understanding forgiveness. You may prefer to restate the first point as, "*I will not dwell on the incident.*" The fact is that where the *incident* was a fairly significant one, it may involuntarily come to our mind, but when it does we remind ourselves that we have forgiven the person and have dealt with it. Perhaps, it also goes without saying that this does not mean that an offended person cannot interact with someone about an offense where their genuine motive is to gain help to address the matter in a God-honoring manner. Nor does it exclude discussion with the person who offended them at a later date as exemplified by Joseph. However, it does exclude the all too common practice of people telling others how they have been offended, rather than address it with the person who offended them and try to resolve it. Too often people discuss their grievances with others with the goal of gaining sympathy and support; that practice is divisive and disobedient.

Before moving on it may be helpful to comment about the use of terms. It is common for people to consider 2 aspects of *forgiveness*. The first aspect is an individual addressing his/her choice to forgive irrespective of the participation by the offender. The second aspect necessitates interaction between the parties with the goal of achieving acceptable closure and restoration of the relationship. I refer to those 2 aspects as *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. You can *forgive* another without experiencing *restoration* of a fractured relationship, but you cannot *restore* a relationship without *forgiveness*. Some use different terms when talking about *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*, for example Ken Sande uses the terms, *positional forgiveness* and *transactional forgiveness*.<sup>2</sup> Whatever terms are used, it is important to realize that a person who has been wronged by another can address the matter and gain victory irrespective of the participation by the person who wronged them. They can turn it over to the Lord and depend on His grace to enable them to move forward as exemplified by Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 1997), p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 189.

However, it is important to understand that the ultimate goal is to restore relationships that have been fractured. In some cases it is actually a matter of preserving a healthy relationship by forgiving an offense without the knowledge of the person who offended us. The wise and prudent course of action so often is for a person to recognize the magnitude of the matter does not warrant interaction with someone who offended them, or that doing so is more liable to unnecessarily escalate the matter. Hence he/she forgives the person and moves on and the relationship is preserved. In cases where the relationship is impaired, it necessitates the involvement of both parties to restore or reconcile that relationship.

## Reconciliation

Let's return to the account of Joseph and his brothers. The meeting of Joseph and his brothers came about because of the famine throughout the entire land. Joseph's brothers went to Egypt seeking food. Joseph recognized his brothers immediately; however, didn't reveal himself to them at the outset. The closest one can get to Joseph retaliating against his brothers is *toying* with them in those initial encounters. While Joseph wasn't plagued by the past, that was not the case for Joseph's brothers. Despite Joseph having forgiven them, they sure didn't feel forgiven. Consider:

**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."

That event 22 years earlier remained at the forefront of their minds. They could still vividly see the Midianites (Ishmaelites) shackling Joseph's feet and putting neck irons on him (Psalm 105.18). Daily, they lived with their deception of their father by telling him Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. They saw firsthand Jacob's grief over his son. When Joseph and his brothers were reunited, imagine the reaction of Joseph's brothers when they learned it was Joseph whom they had been dealing with. They must have had instant feelings of terror, knowing what they would have done if the tables were turned.

**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.

Joseph viewed the past and how he got to Egypt as a part of God's providence. While the brothers' actions were intended for evil, God used them for good. Joseph viewed the outcome from a much a larger perspective.

**Genesis 45:5–8** (ESV) 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.

This incident illustrates some of the dynamics of *forgiveness*. *Forgiveness* not only needs to be offered, as Joseph did, it also needs to be received and accepted for reconciliation to happen and a relationship restored. That is apparent in this historical account. Jacob was 130 when he moved to Egypt (47.9) and he died 17 years later (47.28). The following verses describe the brothers' response when Jacob died,

**Genesis 50:15–17** (ESV) 15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, *"It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."* 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, *"Your father gave this command before he died: 17 'Say to Joseph, 'Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.'"* Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

Why did Joseph weep when he got this message from his brothers? Very simply because his brothers didn't accept the forgiveness he offered. They didn't receive it! They anticipated that now that Jacob was dead, Joseph would retaliate against them, which is what they likely would have done if they were in his shoes. Not only does the offended person need to forgive and be released, but the offender must also accept that forgiveness to be released.

It is inevitable that people hurt and offend others. Fortunately, few of those offenses are of the magnitude of those Joseph experienced. The majority of the hurts and offenses we experience are relatively minor. Often they happen with people we spend a good deal of time with, including family members and friends. It is not surprising then that conflict and hurt happens among believers and in local Churches. Hence it is important that we understand how to be reconciled and how to restore relationships that have been fractured. Following are some of the steps to follow in order to preserve relationships and/or restore relationships.

## 1. **Meet Together**

Just like other areas of Godly living begin with a choice, so does this. It starts with the choice to forgive another. As I noted earlier, there are many places where, after having assessed what happened, we choose to forgive the person and move on without any interaction with the offender and your relationship with them is not impaired in any way. In other cases, the magnitude of the offense or the circumstances surrounding it make it clear that interaction between the parties must happen to resolve the matter. It may be because it has impaired your relationship with the other person, or it has changed the way you treat the other person. The Bible instructs us what to do.

**Matthew 5:23–24** (ESV) 23 *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

That tells us what to do if we know someone has an issue with *us*; we should attempt to be reconciled to him/her. On the other hand, it may be *us* who has an issue with someone else and the Bible also directs us how to address that scenario.

**Matthew 18:15** (ESV) 15 *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."*

It is important to realize that if someone has offended us and we aren't prepared to forgive him/her and move on, we need to follow the Bible's direction to try to resolve the matter with the offender. If we choose to not do that we are being disobedient if we tell others and voice our complaint about it to them. Note the words of Scripture, "*between you and him alone.*" The exception to discussing it with others is where we are genuinely seeking counsel about how we ought to respond and what steps we ought to take. Outside of that it simply falls into the category of gossip and is sin. There may be times when the nature of the offense and the circumstances make it prudent for an appropriately selected individual to be present from the outset.

There are a number of things to bear in mind as you embark on this meeting. It is important to have an open mind and be willing to change your mind about how you perceive what happened. Remember the goal is to restore a relationship, or prevent a relationship from being destroyed. It is not about who is to blame; it is about reconciliation. I noted in the past, Beverley and I went to a *Marriage Enrichment Seminar* years ago. The leader stated over and over, "*Remember you are on the same team.*" Some spouses seem to have forgotten that truth. Sometimes Christians need to be reminded of it as well.

## 2. **Review the History**

Each person needs to share how he/she perceives what happened. That is often referred to as *telling your story* or *reviewing the history*. It is important for each person to allow the other person to describe their perspective and to do so without interrupting them and trying to correct them. As the other person shares his/her perspective, you may come to the realization that you never thought of it in that manner, or that their motive was very different from what you thought. Or the offender may come to the realization that they inadvertently offended you and had no idea that they had done so; they may immediately offer profuse apologies.

Sometimes we discover that people's conclusions are simply a result of their perspective. We often see that in sports. Consider for example a fumble in football. From one vantage point it is very clear the runner fumbled the ball and turned it over to the other team. However, to a viewer on the opposite side it is clear that the runner was down before he fumbled the ball. Sometimes the replay officials not only need to look at the play from different camera angles, but they also need to synchronize the different camera images, frame by frame to determine the order of events to determine which actually happened first.

On the playing field of life, there are times where people understand what happened differently because they view it from a different, but legitimate perspective. Reconciliation requires people to share their perspective but also with openness to view the matter through the lens of the other person. Often times when people hear the other person, they are able to quickly resolve the matter and experience forgiveness and move forward. A classic example of misunderstanding and one which nearly resulted in the tribes of Israel going to war against each other is found in Jos 22. We will look at that in our study of Joshua this year.

### 3. **Take Ownership for Wrongdoing**

When people share how they view what happened it may become very apparent where the wrongdoing lies and it is addressed and dealt with to the satisfaction of both. Individuals need to be willing to own up to what they have done. This is not some self-serving shallow acknowledgment as we often hear when some leader is called to account and they respond with, "*If anyone is offended by what I said or did, I am sorry.*" It is acknowledging wrong doing, whether someone is offended or not. We must be willing to own up to what we do and say and accept the consequences. When people have offended another they not only need to be willing to admit they were wrong, but also be willing to ask for forgiveness.

### 4. **Offer and Receive Forgiveness**

For reconciliation to occur forgiveness needs to be both offered and received. Joseph offered forgiveness to his brothers when he disclosed himself to them; however, they didn't receive it until 17 years later.

It is important to note where it has been a grievous wrong, this will be a process and more than an instantaneous, "*I forgive you,*" statement. There are times when someone has gravely hurt another, but they are unwilling to acknowledge the pain and hurt they have inflicted on another and think everything will be restored in a moment. Where someone has eroded trust through conscious and repetitive acts, it will take time to demonstrate there is a change of heart, recognition of wrongdoing, and a genuine commitment to change behavior.

When addressing forgiveness and reconciliation it is also important that people do not expect the offender to *change the unchangeable* or to *guarantee the future*. Sometimes individuals expect the offender to turn the hands on the clock backwards and change what happened – no one can do that, not even God. Further it is impossible to guarantee that the offender will never wrong the offended person again. The best they can do is promise to try and trust in God's enabling strength to not do so.

### 5. **Restoration**

When the offended and offender follow the above steps and forgiveness is offered and received, then reconciliation begins. In many cases it will be easy to quickly move on while in some cases it will be more of a process. But where people follow God's direction and draw upon the resources God provides to restore relationships, broken relationships can not only be restored, but restored to greater health than previously existed.

### 6. **Unresolved Offences**

Unfortunately all offenses aren't resolved by a person who has been offended meeting with the person who has offended them. In some cases one party will dismiss an offense ever happened, or refuse to address it in a serious manner, or reject their wrongdoing, or refuse to either offer or accept forgiveness. Matthew 18 goes on to describe successive steps if one person pursuing reconciliation with another fails.

**Matthew 18:16-17** (ESV) 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The next step is for the person who has been offended to take someone along with them. In some cases it may be necessary to involve someone to help moderate the dispute. A suitably chosen moderator will guide the parties through the above steps with a goal of restoring the relationship. Sometimes mediators or arbitrators are helpful in pursuing resolution. Where it is clear who is guilty of wrongdoing, if they are unwilling to address the matter, then the matter is brought before the Church.

## Reconciliation

In the course of life it is fairly certain people will experience places where they offend others, or they are offended. Joseph demonstrates that forgiveness and victory are possible. Presumably Joseph and his brothers experienced restored relationships with one another following the death of Jacob. God provides us with grace and His enabling strength to forgive others and successfully restore relationships.

May the following version of *Turn Your Eyes* sung by *Sovereign Grace Music* minister to you today:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2tKVqZZiI4&ab\\_channel=SovereignGraceMusic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2tKVqZZiI4&ab_channel=SovereignGraceMusic)