

The Journey to Forgiveness...And Beyond

Genesis 45:1-15

By Stacy Bastin

Here it is, the moment he has been waiting for...dreaming of...and now he wants to just stand here and savor it. He had been betrayed by his own brothers and now their lives were in his hands. Sweet revenge. But wait...what was this feeling welling up within? Why did his eyes burn? He swallowed hard and tried to regain composure. Soon there would be no turning back so he quickly cleared the room. Once he was alone with these men he so wanted to hate all he could do was weep. With a sobbing voice he revealed his secret...I am your brother Joseph.

Joseph's brothers were no doubt shocked. They had sold him as a slave when he was a teenager. For all they knew he was dead, but now here he stood at least ten years later not a slave but Pharaoh's second in command.

Now let's keep in mind that Joseph is not totally innocent. He was the favored child of Jacob and no doubt a bit of a brat. Genesis 37 tells us that he was a tattler and was not hesitant to share with his family when he had dreams indicating that they would someday bow to him. Not only this, but his father gave him a special coat indicating his status as the favored child. He was probably unbearable at times. No doubt this is not the only time in history or the present for that matter that an older sibling wanted to get rid of a little brother or sister.

After being sold into slavery Joseph became a servant to Potiphar who was the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguards. He quickly moved up in status in Potiphar's house only to be tossed into prison because he refused Potiphar's wife and she accused him of attacking her. In prison he came into contact with the chief cupbearer of Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream and encouraged him that he would be restored to Pharaoh's service and asked that the cupbearer remember him when he was restored. The cupbearer did remember Joseph...2 Years Later when no one could interpret Pharaoh's dream. The cupbearer finally told Pharaoh about Joseph who had been sitting in prison all this time. Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh and became his right hand man. Now Joseph stood before his brothers having planned their demise only to find that he could not go through with it. In fact he FORGIVES them. He tells them that it was God who had brought him here. He doesn't just forgive them...he blesses them!

There is no one among us here today who has not experienced some sort of hurt at the hands of another. Some of these hurts were minor and were easily forgotten, others have left permanent marks either on our body or our soul. Unresolved anger and hurt are like a festering wound leaking poison throughout our body.

Unresolved anger not only affects our spiritual well being, it can also affect our physical well being. Did you know that chronic anger has been linked to everything from heart disease to acne? Our bodies were not created to hold on to anger and when we choose to do so we are more susceptible to headache, insomnia, heart attack, stroke, even skin problems. When we choose to forgive we take back our very lives.

If anger is a festering wound, forgiveness is having that wound bound up so that it can begin to heal. The scars may remain but they are no longer as painful, they are a reminder of what we have come through.

I believe Joseph has something to share with us as we make this journey to forgiveness with him.

Joseph reveals something important about forgiveness in his statement to his brothers. He says, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt." Joseph acknowledges the evil done against him and the fact that it was at the hand of his own family, those who were supposed to stand beside him and protect him. Forgiveness does not mean that we ignore the hurt that has been done, nor do we pretend that it is ok. Likewise, it doesn't require that the offender ask for forgiveness. Joseph forgives his brothers without their even having an opportunity to confess their guilt. We can forgive our offender without the offender asking or even being present.

After acknowledging his hurt, Joseph releases his brothers from his right to revenge. Joseph has the opportunity to repay the evil they have done to him, but he doesn't take it. Part of this process of forgiveness for us is recognizing our own sinfulness. As we realize that we have hurt others it becomes easier for us to identify with those who have hurt us and thus forgive. That is not to say that forgiveness is easy. If it were easy there would not be so much in Scripture about its importance. True forgiveness may require us to forgive and re-forgive. As pain recurs or we recognize that we have not fully forgiven we may be called on to forgive again. When Jesus was asked how many times we should forgive his reply was "Seventy times seven." This is often linked to the idea that we should always forgive, but it might be helpful here as well. I must forgive every time the pain of the offense returns. Sometimes that may only take once, but sometimes it may take a continual forgiving.

Joseph also releases his brothers from their own feelings of guilt. I have often wondered if these brothers ever thought of Joseph wondering what became of him, if they ever suffered from the guilt of knowing that it was their fault their father had suffered so. Joseph's statement here reveals that he has wondered the same thing and has come to the conclusion that they have indeed suffered. He lovingly releases them from that suffering.

As Joseph reveals his forgiveness he tells his brothers that it was not them but God who sent him to Egypt. He says three times in verses 5, 7, and 8 that God sent him, not as a punishment but to preserve life, to preserve a remnant. Joseph's perspective reveals a man who can see the bigger picture. He can see the benefit of his suffering. As a teenager I struggled with forgiving some people who had hurt me deeply. My youth minister gave me some important words of wisdom. He said, "Stacy, I don't know why God has allowed you to go through these things, but I know that somewhere, somehow God will use this pain to minister to someone else." Those words have changed my perspective in life. And, today, I want to say those words to you...I don't know why God has allowed you to go through these things, but I know that somewhere, somehow God will use your pain to minister to someone else. We have all had opportunities to ask God why something had to happen to us. Perhaps the pain we suffer may not be JUST for our benefit but also for someone else's. The fact is God does not cause the pain in our lives. But, whatever your pain, God can use it to meet someone else where they have a need. There are things that will happen that only those who have been in that place will be able to understand.

That is the ministry we have to one another. Part of forgiveness is being able to say to our offender, "Because of this hurt, I will be able to ease the hurt of someone else." What if we as a church began to minister to one another out of our woundedness? What if in a time of need we went to one another and said, "I recognize your pain as my pain and here is how I have begun to heal." God does not cause our pain but he is able to redeem it for his good purposes. Joseph knew that God could redeem all that had happened to him and that made the process of forgiving possible.

Joseph is even able to bless these men who had caused him so much distress. He tells them to quickly go back home and bring back the rest of the family. He offers them the land of Goshen. This would allow them to be close to Joseph and would provide them with a part of Egypt that would be best for their herds, yet was unwanted by the Egyptians.

Keep in mind, I said earlier that part of forgiveness is releasing the offender from our right to revenge, but it does not necessarily release them from the consequences of their actions. As Joseph sends them home these brothers face the difficult task of telling Jacob that the son whom they let him believe was dead was in fact sold into slavery and is alive and well in Egypt. Sure he will be thrilled to know that Joseph is alive, but there is no guarantee that there will not be some sort of consequences. Can you imagine the scene as they start the journey? Everyone is celebrating and talking about how happy Dad's going to be. And then suddenly one of them says, "Um, we have to tell Dad." I can only imagine there was perhaps a casting of lots to decide who was going to have to be the one to explain. "I'm not going to do it," says one of the brothers. "Well, I'm not going to tell him," says another. Someone suggests that Benjamin do it because he's the youngest. Benjamin quickly jumps in, "I wasn't even there." No, forgiveness doesn't mean the offender doesn't have to face the consequences.

Joseph has forgiven his brothers and now begins the process of restoring the broken relationship. I would like to note, and please hear this...when restoring a relationship is possible it can be a good thing. However, it is important for us to understand that there are times when a restored relationship is not possible or even healthy. It is important for us to consider our situation with the wisdom of God and wise counsel.

So, you might say, yeah, Joseph was able to forgive but he was in the Bible so he was special. I can't be like that. I can't just forgive those who have hurt me.

In response, I would like to turn now to another story of forgiveness...In 1991 Aaron and Sarah were returning home from their week long honeymoon. No doubt as they traveled their conversation often turned to their wedding and honeymoon and the new life they were beginning. There was no way for them to know that Joel is rushing to meet his friends in town and that when their paths cross all of their lives will be forever changed. Aaron and Sara are Amish and are traveling in a horse and buggy. Joel flies up behind them in his car and decides to pass them. Unfortunately he doesn't notice the left turn blinker on the buggy and as he begins to pass them, the buggy begins to make its turn. Joel crashes into the side of the buggy killing Sarah.

The day after the accident Joel is escorted to Aaron and Sarah's home. He is no doubt terrified of what will happen there. As he walks through the door he is met with hugs and words of forgiveness from Aaron's family. Slowly making his way to the back of the home, Joel comes face to face with Aaron standing beside the wooden coffin that holds his bride. Aaron, grieving, turns, embraces Joel and says words Joel could never have imagined... "I forgive you." Not only did this family forgive this young man but the families continue to gather every month or so and have dinner together. Did you catch that... These families gather to break bread – TOGETHER.

How can this family forgive like that. My answer came when the Amish were asked the same question... Their reply was that for most of Christianity people are to forgive because God forgave them, but for the Amish, people must forgive so that God can forgive them. This simple phrase brought me to a halting stop... Do I forgive because I am forgiven or do I forgive so that I may be forgiven?

The Amish turn to the Lord's Prayer as their foundation for this belief. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." They also refer to Matthew 6, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

I have found that the most difficult part of this process of forgiveness is believing that God is just and that He has our best interest in mind. Often my lack of forgiveness is a symptom of my lack of trust in God's care for me. I don't trust him to be just, so I take justice upon myself. This is so hard for me to admit to my self and others, but it is truth. When I refuse to forgive it is really my refusal to submit myself to God. The problem is that I can't see all of eternity at once, and I don't know how my response is going to affect others and myself.

Listen to this interesting definition of forgiveness from the Mayo Clinic – Forgiveness is untying oneself from the thoughts and feelings that bind you to the offense committed against you. I don't know about you, that sounds like being imprisoned and that is definitely the opposite of the freedom that Christ came to give. Paul reminds us in Galatians 5:1 that we have been set free and not to let ourselves become entangled again in bondage. Anger and revenge takes so much of our energy, it steals our life away. As we release our offenders from our right to revenge we take back part of ourselves. We spend countless hours rehearsing how this individual or that group caused us pain and what the result will be when we are finally able to get revenge. What could we accomplish if we took back that time and energy? How many lives could be changed because we had the time and energy to love?

Forgiveness is acknowledging the hurt we have experienced and releasing the one who has hurt us from our right to revenge. Forgiveness is trusting God and allowing him to use our circumstances for good not evil. Forgiveness is freeing ourselves from our bondage to anger and seeing our offender as a beloved child of God.

Forgiveness is a choice, a choice to surrender but it is not an easy choice. Forgiveness is a calling, but it is not an easy calling. However, as we learn to look at those who have hurt us through the loving eyes of Christ, understanding that he died for them too...we cannot help but release them into his hands on this journey with us.