



L'Abri Papers #BS01



## FORGIVENESS – “Joseph and His Brothers”

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The issue of forgiveness, far from being a narrow religious or academic topic, is instead a desperately practical one. It is common knowledge that many emotional and physical problems can be traced back to a burden of unforgiven guilt. The head of a large mental hospital once said, “I could dismiss half of my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness.” Violent ethnic clashes on every continent are usually long-standing resentments breaking out in fresh attempts to settle old scores. Such harsh realities caused one secular philosopher to remark: “The only remedy for the inevitability of our history is forgiveness.” But the necessity to find and give forgiveness is not a matter only for those who appear on the glossy pages of news magazines: all of us suffer our own personal grudges and animosities in life. Each individual, therefore, must decide how to respond to such a challenge. Will I become bitter, or will I instead choose the difficult Christian route of forgiveness? The biblical option is expressed in Colossians 3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

The command in Colossians seems clear, but what does it mean? The New Testament passage is well illustrated by the Old Testament narrative of Joseph and his brothers in *Genesis 50:15-21*. *Ten practical points about forgiveness* may be drawn from this.

Joseph’s brothers were jealous of his gifts and of his special relationship with their father. When he was seventeen his brothers took action, throwing him into a well, then selling him to passing slave-traders and reporting his ‘death’ to their father. It was not until Joseph was thirty and after much further suffering that he interpreted a dream for Pharaoh by which he found favour and power in Egypt. Robbed of those precious years by the betrayal of his own brothers, if anyone had just cause to bear a grudge Joseph did.

The story continues with a severe famine in the Middle East which drives Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of grain to purchase. Joseph has compassion on them, giving them grain and finally revealing himself to them and bringing the whole family to live in Egypt.

Joseph, then fifty years old, appears to have put aside any grievance against his brothers. But with the death of old Jacob, their father, the brothers feared that Joseph’s anger and revenge might at last break out against them. And perhaps their fears were not groundless. Joseph certainly did love his father, but it may be that he struggled with his feelings towards his brothers despite his compassion on them in their position of weakness.

This is the *first* point. There are many times when forgiveness is not a quick, easy, one-time action but is instead something that must be consciously done again and again. ***Forgiveness can be a long process.*** For any serious matter, forgiveness is seldom complete even after the first time we choose it. In the story, perhaps Joseph's tears when his brothers come to him after their father's death are a symptom that here finally is the end of something that had taken him a long time to do completely. Forgiving someone can be a painful, difficult thing to do. And so it may well be that in certain situations the answer "I cannot forgive you yet - I'm trying, but I'm just not there" is more honest and to be preferred than the glib words "Never mind, it's okay. Just forget about it".

The brothers approached Joseph saying that, before his death, Jacob had expressed the wish that Joseph would forgive his brothers for all the harm they had done him. The brothers showed more anxiety for their future than genuine sorrow for their past actions. They seemed to show little personal contrition and no admission of responsibility; certainly no attitude of "Lord be merciful to me a sinner". Instead, their message was just before he went, Dad said that you were to forgive us no matter what we may have done to you". It was a poor confession, and the Bible itself mentions no such wish on Jacob's part. Perhaps it was a fabrication on the part of the nervous brothers. Had Jacob intended this, it is more likely that he would have expressed it direct to Joseph rather than to the guilty brothers.

This is the *second* point. ***Forgiveness is not dependent upon confession.*** This is a frequent mistake. Joseph forgave his brothers despite their shabby performance. We sometimes treat forgiveness as the reward for sufficient grovelling and the words "I'm sorry". But confession, like the original wrong done to us, is an action of the other person and as such we cannot control it. Forgiveness is something which God commands us to do, an action that I may choose and which is not dependent upon the behaviour of the other person. He commands it for our own good and for the good of the other person. The truth of this point becomes obvious when one considers being wronged by someone who has since died. No confession is possible, but forgiveness is still required. Joseph's brothers were not really coming clean with him. Joseph probably suspected this, but he forgave them anyway.

Joseph's actions towards his brothers illustrate a *third*, related point. ***Forgiveness does not require an agreed version of the past.*** This is crucial because arguing over who said what and who replied in which fashion frequently postpones or scuttles entirely the process of forgiveness. Joseph did not say to the others "Now before I forgive you I want everything perfectly clear. Let's establish the facts about that afternoon on the road to Dothan thirty years ago". He did not try to rub his brothers' faces in their wrong actions. He did not insist that everyone agree about the history of the matter before reconciliation was possible. That would have been hopeless perhaps; it certainly was unnecessary. Joseph decided to draw a curtain over the past.

Joseph responded to his brothers and their approach: "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?". Here begins the practical action of forgiveness. The *fourth* point is that ***forgiveness means letting go of my natural right to revenge.*** Joseph is not going to retaliate. They have nothing to fear from him. He had been robbed of much of his youth by them, leaving a score to be settled; but he refused to settle it. He was not going to hold it against them. As human beings we are not responsible for the moral balance of the universe. That is God's prerogative alone. As mere creatures we forgo vengeance and leave it to God to judge.

But forgiveness is more than foreswearing revenge isn't it? Is not the goal of forgiveness found in the old adage of 'forgive and forget'?

Perhaps this is the ideal, but the ideal often gets in the way of our progress in the process of

forgiveness as we actually experience it. Therefore, the *fifth* point is that *forgiving does not mean forgetting*. God promises that He will remember our sins no more, but this is an ability which He has not given to us. Computers can erase their memories, but humans have very little control over what they will remember or what they will forget. The more painful an incident the more unlikely it is we can forget it. A better goal is to strive for a memory of the wrong that no longer harbours malice.

Take the model found in Proverbs 17:9 “He who forgives an offence promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends”. Here the opposite of forgiving is not remembering but rather repeating. I cannot decide to forget, but it *is* within my power to decide not to speak of the incident. Here the *sixth* principle: *forgiveness means not bringing it up again*. I forfeit my right to repeat it all over again but choose instead to let it be finished. I do this in three areas. First, to the person who wronged me: I choose not to indulge myself in the luxury of dredging it up once more in cutting reminders. Repeating it shows that full forgiveness has not occurred. Secondly, I choose not to talk about it to a third party in the form of gossip, regardless of how cleverly I cloak it as useful information. I will not spread the word. I will let it stop with me. It was pointless for Joseph to discuss the matter of his brothers’ sin with some uninvolved Egyptian. That is an attempt to make ourselves appear righteous at the expense of someone else. Thirdly, I choose not to repeat it even to myself. If I cannot forget it, I can at least try not to remind myself of it. I will do my best not to dwell on it, secretly relishing my scars and bruises. I will not keep a list of grievances ready to be retrieved the next time I am hurt. The word ‘forget’ itself means to let go, to release or send away. Forgiving is not primarily a statement of what we feel about the other person. It is first of all a choice to set aside the wrong that was done and not to bring it up again.

Joseph continued with his brothers by saying “You intended harm to me”. He is quite blunt about the issue and is not sweeping anything unsavoury under the carpet. The *seventh* point is that *forgiveness does not mean excusing the behaviour of the other person*. In fact, if his or her behaviour can be excused then there is no real need for forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary when the behaviour is inexcusable, when the person involved really should not have acted in such a fashion. We too often make the mistake of saying. “It’s okay; I know you didn’t mean to” or “It doesn’t matter; I realise you were under strain, and I probably provoked you”. Forgiveness begins where excuses leave off.

“God intended it for good”, continues Joseph. This is the *eighth* point *forgiveness is easier when we rest in God’s providence*. This does not mean that God is the author of evil, nor does it mean the brothers are not responsible for their actions. The ability to see God’s hand overruling the malice of people is one of the things that makes forgiveness possible. God frequently works good out of tragedy. As Christians, we recognise that we do not live in an empty universe, that despite our mistakes or those of others, life is redeemable. Things cannot be undone, but they can be made right. We leave this confidently to the hand of God.

An important issue to mention at this point of the narrative is the *ninth* point: *forgiveness does not always mean re-trusting*. If Joseph’s brothers in their relief were now to propose: “Hey, let’s all go off to Dothan like we used to and graze sheep. You know, just the twelve of us ... “, it might perhaps be foolhardy of Joseph, once he has forgiven them, to go along and chance a recurrence of betrayal. A wiser response might be to wait.

Forgiving someone and re-trusting them are separate concepts and need to be kept separate in our thinking. Too frequently people are hesitant to forgive because they are afraid of being mistreated once more. Sometimes one is justified in forgiving past behaviour while

yet being reticent about getting in the same situation a second time. Forgiveness is a choice which I make about my attitude towards you and is within my power to control. Re-trusting is a judgement I make about the state of your trustworthiness and therefore depends partly upon your choice. - It is right for me to need grounds for believing that you have changed and will not do it again.

If forgiveness meant precisely the same thing as re-trusting, then I would have to wait to forgive you until you had changed. But there is nothing virtuous about trusting someone who is untrustworthy. God does not command that of us. Where confession and repentance are deep and sincere, forgiving and re-trusting often come together linked hand in hand. But since I cannot change your trustworthiness as I can my attitude, the two do not always walk side by side or at the same pace. Trustworthiness is one of those things that, due to its very nature, takes time to prove itself.

A trivial example is lending your car a second time to a person who crashed it the first time. A far more serious example is re-trusting a parent or spouse who has physically abused you. Forgiveness is one thing; re-trusting is another.

Joseph then moves on to the heart of the matter in telling his brothers, "I will provide for you and your children". He acts in blessing rather than in bitterness.

In the final analysis, forgiveness is not only a list of negative things – not avenging myself when the opportunity finally presents itself, not mentioning the offence again. Forgiveness has a positive, active side to it. Joseph reassured his brothers. He promised to provide for them, and we are told he "spoke kindly" to them. He did not respond by saying "I am not going to retaliate, but leave me and never come back again". His forgiveness in other words, was not half-way. Joseph's tears show that the anger has finally drained away. Instead he wishes them well and does what he can to see they prosper. The *tenth* point is that ***forgiveness is incomplete until love replaces anger***. For Joseph the anger and resentment are gone. He has let go of these so that he may go on to grasp reconciliation.

Each of these ten points is important, but the very heart of forgiveness can be summarised by the three things *we chose to forgo when we decide to obey God's command to forgive*. We let go of revenge; we commit ourselves not to bring the matter up again; we do our best not to encourage and cultivate our anger. However, the fact that these are choices available to us does not mean of course that they are easy, but they *are* God's way and the *only* way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon preached by Barry Seagren at the International Presbyterian Church (14 March 1993).