

The process of forgiving

Genesis 41–49

“Just forgive and forget!” Such flippant counsel usually comes from someone who has never been deeply hurt. Genuine forgiveness is often a process that takes considerable time and effort.

Jesus said we should forgive 70 times seven. That suggests something other than forgiving someone of 490 different offenses, or even forgiving an infinite number of times. If you have been hurt deeply, you can desire to forgive and forget, but something always seems to happen to recall the hurt. This means you have to forgive the same offense again and again. Ask a wife whose husband has been unfaithful or a child who has been molested. They have to forgive the offense repeatedly for years because the memory remains.

Joseph modeled genuine forgiveness. His jealous brothers sold him to slave traders when he was just 17 years old. In a matter of a few hours, Joseph went from being the pampered son of a wealthy father in Israel to the lowly slave of a complete stranger in Egypt.

Imagine the fear, the tears, the anger, the loneliness, and the bitterness that young Joseph battled daily. For over a decade he endured hard manual labor with no pay and then the humiliation of imprisonment with no hope of release. He was a nobody, but through the miraculous intervention of

God, Joseph was almost instantly promoted to the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Then one unsuspecting day during a severe famine, Joseph’s 10 brothers appeared on his doorstep begging for a handout. Joseph finally had them right where anyone craving revenge would want them—they were bowing down to him! More than two decades after they had caused him so much pain, he could make them pay for what they had done.

Joseph waited and wrestled with his own feelings. He didn’t immediately say, “I’m Joseph, your brother! I’m so glad you’re here! All is forgiven!” He needed time to get his own emotions under control and to plan a proper response.

Joseph released the right to retaliate. His brothers’ ruthless, self-centered behavior had cost him the best years of his life. He had every right to get even. But Joseph resisted the temptation to strike back.

Joseph tested their sincerity. He waited to see if their hearts had changed. Did they regret what they had done? Would they do the same to his younger brother Benjamin if given the opportunity? Forgiveness is facilitated by a repentant spirit and a humble apology.

Joseph admitted the hurt. He didn’t gloss over it and pretend nothing serious had happened. He defined reality and stated clearly, “You meant it for

evil.” What they did was awful and they needed to repent.

Joseph acknowledged the sovereignty of God over all circumstances. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” If he had never become an Egyptian slave he would not be in charge of grain distribution and his family wouldn’t be provided for in the famine. All things had worked together for good.

Joseph did his best to restore the relationship with his brothers. “I am your brother!” he explained. He told them to bring their father and their families to Egypt to live and he would provide for them. Genuine forgiveness seeks to restore the alienated relationship to its former status. That’s not always feasible and sometimes not even advisable, but as much as it is possible, we should live as though the offense never happened. That’s forgiveness.

Lewis Smedes suggests, “The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. We set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free is ourselves.” ■

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Bob Russell is senior minister at Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky.

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- Day 5** Matthew 9:14–26
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- Day 4** Matthew 9:1–13
 Acts 13:1–25
 Psalm 21
 Genesis 46, 47

- Day 6** Matthew 9:27–38
 Acts 14
 Psalm 22:12–31
 Genesis 49

What Do You Think?

- Whom do you need to forgive?
- Will forgiving this person set you free? How?