

Forgive as God has Forgiven You

Genesis 50:15-21 (NIV)

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

"Revenge is a dish best served cold." Revenge is most satisfying when you wait a good long time to enact it, to get back at someone. This thought plagued Joseph's brothers after their father died. "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" (verse 15)

It had been about 40 years since his brothers sold their little brother Joseph, who was 17 at the time, into slavery, and this was their alternative to outright killing him due to their anger and jealousy against him. They had covered up Joseph's disappearance by lying to their father, telling Jacob that Joseph had been killed by some vicious beast. Amazingly, God used this wicked thing to put Joseph in a position to save the people of Egypt while they experienced a seven-year long famine, a famine that brought Joseph's family back together. It had been 17 years since Joseph's father and his brothers learned that Joseph was still alive and he moved them all to Egypt so that he could take care of them. 17 years of care, but now when Jacob dies the brothers' guilty consciences overtake them. What if now Joseph serves up his revenge 40 years after that horrible thing we did to get rid of him?

Have you been plagued with guilt years after a sin you committed against someone? Do you as an adult, a teen, or just a year older remember how you used to make fun of that classmate, that classmate that seemingly no one liked? Do you recall the names you used to call him, the cruelty in your actions towards him? Do you wish you could go back and slap some sense into your younger self who was so awful to that person? Do you recall a moment when you were complaining about someone else, maybe a coworker or a boss, and then they walked right past you? You know that they probably heard you, yet there was no immediate reaction, no confrontation. When will they get their revenge? Are they biding their time, waiting for an opportune moment to use this against me? The guilt eats at you. You are waiting for that moment when they will get you back. And you know that you deserve it. It should come to you. In fact, a piece of you just wants to get it over and done with so that you can stop waiting and wondering when it will happen. If they finally get you back, then the deed will have been repaid, and I can move on with my life.

We treat the removal of guilt as something that can be accomplished if we just suffer enough, suffer something equitable to the suffering that we have caused this other person. If we let someone hurt us or wrong us in the way we have hurt or wronged them, then the guilt will go away. Guilt is satisfied through pain and punishment.

In a way, you're right. Guilt is satisfied and taken away through pain and punishment, but not through our pain and suffering. For the wrongs we had done, we can never suffer enough. It's not enough to suffer just for the people that we have hurt and treated so wrongly because we have not just hurt other people; we have also hurt ourselves and, more importantly, God.

The only way that our guilt can ever be satisfied and taken away through pain and punishment is through someone suffering for the wrong we have done to others, ourselves, and God. That is the message of the cross. That is what our God, Jesus Christ, did by allowing himself to suffer and die in the way that he did. On the cross the guilt of what we had done, the wrongs we committed against others and against God, were put upon him. Jesus suffered for them and so has taken away our guilt. God did not plot out revenge against us for our sins and serve that dish up cold. He served that dish to himself, doing away with our guilt.

Recognizing that God has made satisfaction for our guilt through his pain and punishment leads us to do what Joseph's brothers did: to plead for mercy, ask for forgiveness, and offer to make restitution where possible. We ask that person who we wronged to forgive us because we need it. Then we strive to make amends with that person, to no longer sin against them, motivated not by guilt but because God has forgiven us and we now live in that forgiveness. Who do you need to ask forgiveness from for the guilt you carry around?

There's another side to this situation, though: being the person who was wronged. Think of Joseph. You know how easy it would have been for him to let the hurt of what his brothers did to grow into hatred, how he could have spent his time imprisoned to develop an elaborate plot of revenge. When his brothers came to Egypt for food, he could have denied them and made them go hungry. He could have imprisoned them. He could have had them sold into slavery and demanded that they pay him back for the years of slavery that he endured, being just like the unmerciful servant that Jesus taught his disciples about. Joseph could have denied forgiveness to his brothers, feeling as if they owed him something before he would even think to forgive them.

We understand that Joseph could have done these things because sometimes we withhold forgiveness. We hold on to the hurt that someone inflicted upon us. We refuse to forgive until we have been recompensed, until we exacted some kind of repayment.

When we withhold forgiveness, though, we put ourselves in grave spiritual danger. When we withhold forgiveness, we put ourselves in God's place as judge, that we decide the terms, we decide the repayment necessary, and until we are satisfied, there is no forgiveness. When we withhold forgiveness, we become the unmerciful servant.

God tells us in no uncertain terms that when we demand repayment for the debts of wrongs against us before we forgive, then God will demand the same from you. He will not forgive you for your debt of sin against him, how you have wronged him with every infraction of perfection incurred during our life. He will demand that you repay him for everything you have ever done wrong, and that includes everything we have done against another person, against ourselves, and, as every sin ultimately is, against God. When we refuse to forgive, God tells us that there is no forgiveness from him for us either. We remain in the guilt of our sin.

Joseph, though, did not demand that his brothers earn his forgiveness. No, Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" (verse 19) He forgave because God had forgiven him of his sins, of his youthful arrogance, of his pride, of anything he had ever done wrong. In fact, Joseph wept at his brothers' request for forgiveness. He wept because he realized that his brothers were still carrying guilt for their actions which God had already forgiven, which he had already forgiven. Joseph wept because in the last 17 years he had not made it clear enough to his brothers that they were forgiven, their guilt was paid for by God, that because God had made satisfaction for their guilt through his pain and suffering no one would seek repayment for how they had wronged Joseph.

How do you forgive someone who has wronged you in such a long-lasting way? There's a cliché that floats around that sadly we buy into: Forgive and forget. Sometimes we get it into our heads that we have not forgiven someone unless we have forgotten the wrongs they have done against us. Forgetting a sin is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. Joseph remembered what his brothers did to him, but that didn't stop him from forgiving them. In fact, he saw the hand of God in these events, how God turned a wicked action into a life-saving event. He said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (verse 20) Even while remembering what his brothers had done to him, Joseph lived the words Paul would write almost 2000 years later: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)

When it comes to forgiving someone, it starts first with what God has done for you. Through the perfect life and sacrifice on the cross of our God, of Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you. He has removed your sins from you as far as the east is from the west. In fact, God chose to forget our sins and remember our wickedness no more. He is the only one to perfectly live out the idea of forgive and forget. In the same way he has taken away your guilt, so also, he has forgiven your sins, never to claim repayment for your wrongs against him, against others, or against yourself.

Out of God's forgiveness for us, we forgive others even when we haven't forgotten what they have done to us. Forgiving someone else means giving up thoughts of revenge, of getting even. You give up getting repaid for how you were wronged because God has paid that bill of wrong against us in full. When I forgive someone, I choose not to hold that debt of sin against them anymore, not to exact revenge. It's not easy. We can only do it as we live in the forgiveness God has given us.

As the one who has been wronged, we also need to remember what Joseph had to do 17 years after he had forgiven his brothers for selling him into slavery. Joseph said to them as they pleaded for forgiveness, "Don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (verse 21) Joseph forgave them again, even 17 years later, after 17 years of living in his kindness and care. And so we don't hesitate to forgive again those who wronged us, even well after the sin has been committed. We reassure them that we will not seek recompense because God has already paid for their sin through his pain and suffering as our Savior. As Peter asked, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22) Jesus said this not to set a ceiling limit on forgiveness, but to tell us to be merciful as he is merciful. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. He took on the debt our sins incurred against him, against others, and against ourselves. In Christ, he forgave us our sins. In that forgiveness, we forgive others.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, when you feel guilt over how you have wronged someone, ask them for forgiveness, like Joseph's brothers did. Even if they don't forgive you, you know that Christ has suffered for you to take away your guilt. It is paid for. You are

forgiven and guilt free. God remembers your sin no more. When someone sins against you and asks for forgiveness, you forgive as in Christ God forgave you. You forgive without hesitation, without demanding repayment, without seeking to hurt them in the way they have hurt you. God does not seek repayment from you for your sin. So neither do we. Instead, we reassure people of their forgiveness that God has given them and as you have given them. Show that forgiveness in how you treat them. Live God's forgiveness. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)
Amen.

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