

Week Five

Living in the Shelter of a Sovereign God . . .

When It's Hard to Forgive

The great C.S. Lewis defined real forgiveness as “looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.” This definition most certainly reflects the mind-blowing forgiveness that God lavishes on each and every sinner who places his or her faith in the atoning work of Jesus. But it might surprise you that tucked away in the first book of the Bible - long before Jesus was sent to earth to die on the cross – is one of the most stunning examples of the kind of forgiveness that Lewis describes, the kind of forgiveness God gives, and the kind of forgiveness that we are called to give as well. That stunning example is found in the life of Joseph.

Where we would expect to see Joseph harbor bitterness and respond in hateful vengeance toward the heartless band of brothers who had (on a human plain at least) wrecked his entire life, we instead see mercy, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. What the brothers did to Joseph was not okay, nor was Joseph able to wipe the memory from his mind. But instead of fixing his eyes on their sin, he *chose* to fix his eyes on the sovereign hand of God who used their sin to secure salvation for a whole lot of people.

As exciting as that is and as much as we love to marvel at the forgiveness and grace we see throughout the Scriptures, we all know that forgiveness is one of the hardest things that God calls us to do. Let me rephrase that - it's **the** hardest thing that God calls us to do! Tim Keller says that “forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering” and I wholeheartedly agree. It demands everything we *don't* want to give up - our pride, our desire to get even, our right to be right, our authority to stand as judge, our ability to punish our offender(s), our victim mentality, and our strange addiction to rehearsing the offense over and over again in our minds. These are the things with which we grow accustomed to nursing our wounds, numbing our pain, and satisfying our God-given sense of justice. It can be agonizing to let them go.

So the question before us this week is **how**? Not just how do we forgive, but how do we get to a place where we even *want* to forgive – where we are willing to even entertain the ideas that it's not our job to make our offender(s) pay, that God alone is judge, and that the “costly suffering” involved in forgiving is *nothing* compared to the costly suffering of harboring bitterness toward those who have hurt us. Once again, we have a lot to learn from our dear friend Joseph, so open your Bible to Genesis 42 and let's get started.

Day 1

So far we have been moving really slowly through the narrative. This week we will start to pick up the pace quite a bit, which means that you will have more reading to do each day. I am 100% confident that you are more than ready for it and know that if you were standing in front of me right now I would hear an impassioned, “Bring it on!” come out of your mouth. Right? *RIGHT?! Okay then, let’s go!*

Read **Genesis 42:1-38** and answer the following questions.

- 1) What do verses 42:2-5 indicate about the severity of the famine and how it had affected Jacob’s family?

- 2) How did the brothers respond to the famine crisis (Jacob scolds them for this)? (42:1)

- 3) Why didn’t Jacob send Benjamin with the rest of the brothers? (42:4)

What reason(s) did Jacob have to fear such a thing?

- 4) What does 42:6 remind you of? (Genesis 37:7)

A closer look: Verses 7, 8 and 23 make it very clear that Joseph was totally unrecognizable to the brothers. This shows us once again how “Egyptianized” Joseph was at this point. While he remarkably never embraced the idolatrous religion of Egypt, he looked like an Egyptian, talked like an Egyptian, and even walked like an Egyptian (wink, wink – I’m so funny). Add to that the facts that it had been 13 years since they had seen him and that this was the *last* place his brothers would ever expect to find him, and it’s very easy to understand why they are so oblivious to his true identity until he reveals it.

5) What does Joseph accuse the brothers of in 42:9, 12 and 14?

A closer look: “This charge was a means of determining the character of his brothers, not personal retaliation. Eventually, he will put them in the same situations they once had faced and failed: the imprisonment of a brother and monetary gain (Simeon) and the opportunity to rid themselves of a rival (Benjamin).”¹ The reference to Joseph remembering his dreams in verse 9 signals the reader that Joseph’s schemes are motivated by his God-given vision, not what the brothers had done to him.²

6) Why did Joseph show a special interest in Benjamin (42:15)? (see Genesis 35:23-26, especially v. 24)

7) What do you think the brothers’ three days in prison (v. 17) were like? (What do you think they discussed with one another . . . what might they have thought about . . . how do you think they felt . . .etc.?)

8) It appears as though the 3 days the brothers were in prison had an effect on Joseph. Compare what he required of them in 42:15 with his demand in 42: 19 and 20.

9) So far Joseph has been the one confined in prison, but verses 21 and 22 reveal that the brothers had been in a “prison” of their own all these years. What do these verses teach us about the nature of unconfessed sin?

10) Why is guilt a much-needed “prelude” to grace? (If you need help, see Psalm 32:3-5.)

A closer look: I LOVE what Kenneth Matthews says about Joseph’s actions and his brothers’ response: “Their confession in vv. 21–22 initiates them on the path to spiritual renewal and family reconciliation. By placing them in jail for three days, *Joseph set them in the crucible of transformation*” (emphasis added).³ I can’t even begin to describe how many times God has lovingly placed me in a “crucible of transformation” where He confronts me with my sin, forces me to get real, and then supplies the grace to get clean. I love that we get to watch this happen with these brothers!

11) What emotion (or mixture of emotions) do you think causes Joseph to weep in 42:24?

12) How do the brothers respond to the discovery of their money in their sacks? (42:28)

A closer look: “Though nothing was said about Joseph’s intention [behind returning the money], the words of the brothers as they discovered their money were all that the narrative required: ‘What is this that God has done to us?’ (v.28). We, the readers, know that it was Joseph who put the money in their sacks, but the brothers give expression to the underlying point of the narrative. *God was behind it all and through it all was working out his purposes (50:20)*” (emphasis added).⁴

13) For each of Jacob’s statements in 42:36, write down the *truth* that Jacob didn’t know at the time:

Statement: “Joseph is no more.”

Truth:

Statement: “Simeon is no more”

Truth:

Statement: “Everything is against me.”

Truth:

- 14) Have you ever experienced a time in your life when it felt like everything was against you - when it was impossible to see God's hand at work? If so, briefly describe the situation.

If you are out of it now and are able to look back on that time, how was God at work in those circumstances even though you couldn't see it?

- 15) Jacob's response to the brothers' request (42:36, 38) gives us a very clear picture of the "problem" with God's sovereignty which is this: ***we can't always see it!*** According to the following verses, what is required when you just can't see God working in your life?
- Proverbs 3:5, 6
 - Isaiah 50:10
 - 2 Corinthians 4:18, 5:7
 - Hebrews 11:1
- 16) List some qualities/characteristics/attributes that God has revealed about Himself that make Him ***completely*** worthy of your ***total*** trust and reliance even when you cannot see Him. He is . . .

Day 2

Read **Genesis 43:1-34** and answer the following questions.

1) What motivated Jacob to ask the brothers to return to Egypt? (43:1, 2)

2) Who became the spokesman of the group? (43:3)

Summarize Judah's assessment of the situation. (43:3-5)

What does Judah offer to do? (43:8-10)

3) Who does Israel (Jacob) blame for this difficult situation? (43:6, 7)

What is the brothers' defense? (43:7)

4) Contrast the words of "Israel" in 43:13, 14 with the words of "Jacob" in 42:36, 38. What do you see from him in chapter 43 that you didn't see in chapter 42?

A closer look: One of my commentaries points out that at this point in the narrative the name Israel - which hasn't been used since 37:13 - begins to be used instead of Jacob. "It seems that, as long as Jacob seemed completely broken and defeated by virtue of Joseph's apparent death, his old name, Jacob, is used (note Genesis 37:34; 42:1, 4, 29, 36). Now, for the first time, he begins to consider the possibility of allowing Benjamin to go. His faith is in the process of revival, and so he is called Israel again."⁵

- 5) What does Israel/Jacob specifically ask “God Almighty” (*El Shaddai* in Hebrew) to grant his sons? (43:14)

A closer look: Several commentators draw out the connection between the prayer in verse 14 and Joseph’s response to the brothers, particularly in verse 30. Kent Hughes explains it well: “The opening phrase ‘May God Almighty grant you mercy’ – is not perfunctory (careless) rhetoric, because mercy is the narrative key (theme) of this entire episode. In fact, the events that would take place on the day of the brothers’ arrival in Egypt were a demonstration of God’s mercy. Near the conclusion of this section, in verse 30, when Joseph sees Benjamin, we read ‘Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion [or mercy] grew warm.’ It is the exact Hebrew word that is translated ‘mercy’ in verse 14. So we see that mercy frames the account from beginning to end.”⁶ Mercy . . . *from beginning to end*. Isn’t that just like God?! Beautiful!

- 6) Describe the brothers’ emotional state as they awaited their meal with Joseph? (43:18-22)

- 7) It is unclear if Joseph’s faith in Yahweh had rubbed off on the Egyptian house steward or if Joseph had told the house steward what to say to the men. Either way, what does the house steward tell the brothers to reassure them? (43:23)

A closer look: The house steward is not lying, nor is he describing some kind of miracle (see 42:25). What he’s doing is highlighting the fact that regardless of how it looked on the surface, it was **God** who was at work carrying out his plan for the brothers through human agents.

- 8) What significant act occurs (again!) in 43:26 and 28?
- 9) Describe the preferential treatment Benjamin receives in . . .

43:29 (Joseph’s greeting) –

43:30 (Joseph’s reaction) –

43:34 (Joseph’s hospitality) -

- 10) How does Joseph's blatant preferential treatment of Benjamin serve as another important test for the brothers? In other words, what do you think Joseph is seeking to accomplish through his actions?

- 11) What does the brothers' reaction in 43:34b reveal about the changing condition of their hearts?

- 12) Keeping in mind that they couldn't eat at the same table with Joseph because he was so superior to them (43:32), describe the previous meal the brothers had experienced in Joseph's presence (37:24, 25).

Oh, the irony!

- 13) What about the meal astonished the brothers? (43:33)

A closer look: Henry Morris points out an interesting fact about the seating chart that day: There are no less than 39, 917,000 different orders in which the eleven brothers could have been seated. For the servants to select the *one* correct order by chance was nearly impossible, with odds of 40 million to one!⁷

Day 3

Read **Genesis 44:1-34** and answer the following questions.

- 1) Describe Joseph's final test for his brothers. (44:1-13)
- 2) Why do you think Joseph has the special cup put in *Benjamin's* bag?
- 3) Compare 44: 9 with verse 10. In effect Joseph says, "No death, just slavery." What does this remind you of?
- 4) How do you think the brothers felt as each sack was opened - one by one - until the cup was finally found in Benjamin's sack? (44:13 gives you a clue.)

A closer look: So what's the deal with the cup? The *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* sheds some light on how such vessels were used in ancient Egypt: "This goblet was a 'divining cup', a prized possession, used for receiving oracles or pictures of coming events. First, water was poured in. Then small fragments of gold, silver, or precious stones were thrown into the water. When the water was shaken slightly, the fragments formed a 'picture' or pattern. Skilled users of the device claimed to be able to divine the unknown. It was a class of magic called 'hydromancy.'"⁸ It seems very strange that a God-fearing man like Joseph who has proven many times that he firmly believes that God and God alone holds the future would use a cup like this. Henry Morris gives some helpful insight: "It is probable that Joseph, in his preliminary dealings with his brothers was still adapting his image to that expected of an Egyptian leader who had priestly and political functions."⁹ The set-up needed to be a big deal. Planting such a rare and sacred item in one of the sacks fit the bill.

- 5) What significant event occurs (for the 4th time) in 44:14?

- 6) Judah knew they were innocent when it came to the cup, so what “iniquity” does he speak of in 44:16?
- 7) The real beauty of this chapter is what it reveals about Judah, whose transformation is an important sub-plot of this whole story. Why is Judah such a significant character? (If you don’t remember, see Genesis 49:10; Matthew 1:1-3; Hebrews 7:14; Revelation 5:5.)
- 8) How is Judah’s plea for Benjamin’s rescue (44:18-34) different from his plea for Joseph’s rescue (37:26, 27)?
- 9) What alternative does Judah offer to satisfy justice? (44:32, 33)

By offering his own life in place of his brother’s, which of Judah’s descendants does he remind you of? (If you need some help, see 2 Corinthians 5:21 and/or 1 Peter 2:24.)

- 10) What do you imagine Joseph was thinking and feeling as he listened to Judah’s plea?
- 11) Here’s a recap of Judah’s failures: He sold a brother into slavery, lied to his own father, married a Canaanite, hired a prostitute, and deceived poor Tamar. Now he finally acts in a spirit of genuine repentance and self-sacrifice and is known throughout history as an ancestor/predecessor of the Messiah. How does his transformation and legacy encourage you?

Day 4

Read **Genesis 45:1-28** and answer the following questions.

- 1) What was Joseph's response to Judah's heartfelt plea for Benjamin? (45:1-3)
- 2) How did the brothers feel as they observed Joseph's uncontrollable outburst of emotion and subsequent revealing of his identity? (45:3)

A closer look: The word "dismayed", "troubled", or "terrified" in verse 3 refers to the panic that seizes a person when surprised by obvious doom.

- 3) What did Joseph appeal to *three times* in order to put his brothers' hearts and minds at ease? (45:5-9)

Underline or circle each occurrence of the word "God" in these verses.

- 4) Why did Joseph believe that God had sent him to Egypt? (45:5-7)
- 5) What was Joseph's plan for his family going forward? (45:9-13)
- 6) How does Pharaoh support these plans? (45:16-20)
- 7) Take a look at 45:15 where we see Joseph physically express his desire to reconcile with his brothers. How many of them did he kiss and weep on?

What do you think they talked about?

Why does the phrase “his brothers talked with him” signal major progress in their relationship with Joseph? (look back at 37:4)

- 8) What final word of instruction does Joseph give his brothers as he sends them on their way back to Canaan? (45:24)

Why do you think Joseph said this?

- 9) How did Jacob initially respond to the news that Joseph was alive *AND* “ruler over all the land of Egypt”? (45:26)

How did he respond once he observed the brothers’ report was true? (45:27, 28)

- 10) List all the ways that Israel’s prayer back in 43:14 had been answered.

What does this reveal about the power, grace, and generosity of God?

- 11) Have you ever been “stunned” by the activity of God? If so, how has God far exceeded your prayers and expectations?

- 12) Turn to Ephesians 3:20, 21 where you will find one of the most beautiful doxologies in all of Scripture. Write it below and spend a few moments marveling at the abundance of God's provision!

Day 5

Read **Genesis 50:15-21** and answer the following questions.

You read that right – we are skipping ahead to the end of the narrative. We will be back in chapter 46 next week.

- 1) After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers are again filled with fear. Why? (50:15)

- 2) What do they do to try to appease Joseph in order to protect themselves from his wrath? (50:16-18)

- 3) What was Joseph's response to them? (50:19-21)

- 4) What rhetorical question does Joseph pose in 50:19?

What does he mean by this? In other words, what point is he seeking to get across to his brothers?

- 5) What is God's job (not ours!) according to Romans 12:19?

6) Had Joseph sought to “play God” in this story by taking justice into his own hands, how would the outcome have been different for him and his brothers?

7) Take another look at Romans 12, but this time read verse 21. Write it out in the space below.

How do you see this lived out in Joseph’s life?

8) How does Joseph’s response to his brothers’ sin reflect God’s response to our sin through Christ?

9) Is there someone in your life who has hurt and/or offended you? How are you following Joseph’s example? In other words, how are you applying Romans 12:21?

If you are struggling to “overcome evil with good,” what do you think you lack? In other words, what do you think needs to happen in your heart and mind for you to forgive and extend kindness?

10) Why is an awareness of God’s sovereignty absolutely necessary to forgive those who hurt us?

- 11) In addition to resting in God's sovereignty, what else must we as believers be keenly aware of as we process our emotions and feelings and deal with those who sin against us? (see Ephesians 4:32)
- 12) If you have time today, and particularly if you are struggling to forgive someone, read and reflect on the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35.

After reading the entire parable, fill in the blank below with the name of the person you are struggling to forgive. Hear the God who has lavishly forgiven your sin debt saying to you:

“Should you not also have mercy on _____, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”

¹ Matthews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 11:27–50:26*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 777.

² Sailhamer, J. H. *Genesis*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1990), 245.

³ Matthews, 779.

⁴ Sailhamer, 246.

⁵ Morris, Henry. *The Genesis Record – A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 605.

⁶ Hughes, Kent. *Genesis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 503.

⁷ Morris, 610.

⁸ Pfeiffer, C. F. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962). LOGOS Bible Software addition.

⁹ Morris, 613.