

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2008

## Overcoming: A Life Well Lived

*The Life of Joseph from the book of Genesis*

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Overcoming the Unwillingness to Forgive

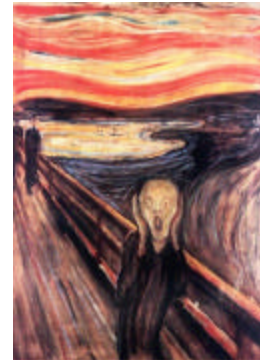
Genesis 44-45

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Last week I was minding my own business taking a shower at the end of the day. I was washing my face, so my eyes were full of soap, when suddenly the shower door flew open and this was what appeared in front of my bleared vision [John with mask]

And this is what I looked like. [“The Scream” by Edvard Munch] You’ll notice that Edvard Munch has made the scream in this picture fill the whole landscape. And that is exactly what I sounded like.



My scream filled the entire house and woke our sleeping daughter.

And suddenly I had something to forgive my husband for, who was completely unrepentant. Despite the fact that I threw my face lotion after him and screamed, I could still hear him laughing two rooms away ten minutes later.

Now on the scale of forgiveness, this is so minor it’s laughable. Actually, it was laughable and even I thought it was funny once I stopped having a heart attack. I did suggest darkly to him that he might enjoy sleeping down the hall, but he knew I was just kidding.

Just so you know, he had bought some scary masks to take to our nephews in England, whom I’m sure will put them to good use terrifying their little sister Fiona, much as John and Andrew used to scare their little brother Simon. Some things never change.

But these antics did cause me to reflect on the subject of forgiveness, because it’s really been quite a while since I needed to forgive someone. I’ve had plenty of occasions to ASK forgiveness, but it’s been a long time since I believed myself to be wronged, and that is an unpleasant sensation.

We’ve been studying Joseph’s life for quite a few weeks and we’ve seen that he had plenty to forgive others for.

First, he needed to forgive his father for showing such favoritism towards him that his relationship with his brothers was ruined.

Second, he needed to forgive his brothers for nearly killing him and then selling him into slavery in Egypt.

Third, he needed to forgive Potiphar's wife for trying to seduce him and then wrongly accusing him, resulting in a prison sentence.

Fourth, he needed to forgive the royal cup bearer for forgetting Joseph's help as soon as he left prison and returned to Pharaoh's service.

Things have been pretty good for awhile. Joseph now has a wife whom he apparently loves. He has two sons, whose names reflect their Hebrew heritage and Joseph's attitude of thanks to God. He has the number two job in the nation and is immensely powerful. And he understands that God has orchestrated every step of his path.

But imagine how the past hurt suddenly looms up when ten of his brothers appear, wanting to buy grain. How all those feelings from the past that he had worked so hard to overcome might be boiling up inside him, especially when Joseph now has the power, literally, of life or death over them.

So today I want us to turn to chapters 44 and 45 of Genesis and consider the topic "Overcoming an Unwillingness to Forgive." There is an outline in your prayer page as well if you wish to take notes.

## **I. Joseph Tests His Brothers**

Last week Michelle took us through the initial meeting of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 42, when they left Simeon as a pledge of their return, and the second trip in Genesis 43, when the brothers brought Benjamin with them at Joseph's request. They still had a bad conscience about the fact that their money was returned in their bags during the first trip, but were reassured by their kind reception from Joseph. When he provided them with a banquet and seated them in their birth order, they knew there was something uncanny about him.

Now the brothers, having regained Simeon and purchased more grain, are about to leave Egypt. Look at Genesis 44:1, where we see:

### **A. The silver cup (Genesis 44:1-17)**

**"Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house. 'Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain.' And he did as Joseph said." (Genesis 44:1-2)**

The brothers leave Egypt, but haven't gone far when Joseph sends his steward after them. When he catches them he says, **"Why have you repaid good with evil? Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done." (Genesis 44:4)**

Understandably, they begin protesting. Why would they do a thing like that? They even tried to repay the money that had been mistakenly returned to them before. In fact they are so sure of their innocence that they say, in verse 9: **"If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves." (Genesis 44:9)**

After these brave words, they lower their sacks for searching only to discover that Benjamin's sack contains the silver cup. Judah says, **“God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves.” (Genesis 44:16)**

But Joseph is magnanimous. He says he'll just keep the one whose sack it was in – in other words, his little brother Benjamin.

Then Judah makes an incredible speech, and in it we see Judah as

### **B. The substitutionary brother (Genesis 44:18-34)**

**“Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, ‘Do you have a father or a brother?’ And we answered, ‘We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him.**

**Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me so I can see him for myself.’ And we said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he leaves him, his father will die.’ But you told your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.’ When we went back to your servant my father, we told him what my lord has said.” (Genesis 44:18-24)**

Judah then explains that, despite his father's reluctance, the specter of starvation caused Jacob to let the brothers go and take Benjamin. Judah pleads eloquently, explaining that leaving Benjamin will kill Jacob with grief. And in verse 33 Judah makes a remarkable offer:

**“Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father!” (Genesis 44:33-34)**

Judah offers his own life as a substitution for Benjamin's, knowing that he may never see his family again. Judah himself has lost his first two sons, Er and Onan. He has lost his wife. He has seen two sons, Perez and Zerah, come into the world as a result of his unintentional immorality with his daughter in law Tamar. He has Joseph's fate and possible death on his conscience. This is a man with a very bad past, but now he is done with all that. Judah offers his life not so much for love of Benjamin, but rather because he loves his father JACOB. And he will not risk doing again to Jacob what was already done with Joseph's supposed death.. By his action, Judah shows that he is truly repentant for what he did to Joseph. Now he's got a chance to save himself by abandoning another brother into slavery, but instead offers his own life in exchange.

My friends, Judah is an example we need to ponder. There comes a time for all of us when we can say, “It doesn't matter what I did in my past. It doesn't matter how much shame I feel for my bad actions. From this time forward, I WILL NOT DO that wrong again, by the grace of God.”

I believe that God rejoiced in heaven to see this concrete evidence of Judah's repentance. And that also explains why Joseph did the strange thing with the silver cup. He wasn't just messing with their heads. He wanted to put his brothers into a situation where they had exactly the same chance

to do wrong, and to see if they had changed enough to stop sinning. They had the opportunity to get themselves out of a mess by pointing the finger at Benjamin, and letting him die just as they had done to Joseph. But instead of repeating that sin, they fought hard – offering their own lives – to spare their little brother.

Isn't that the truest sign of repentance? Repentance isn't just remorse for getting caught, or sorrow over the consequences. It is the firm resolve NEVER to do that thing again, no matter what the stakes are. In Hebrews 12: 4 the writer says, **"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."** In other words, we don't lay down our lives rather than sin, as Jesus did. Yet these brothers, despite their wicked past, were able to say with resolve: Benjamin, we will not abandon you. If you go into slavery, we will too. And Judah goes one better and offers his own life in exchange for Benjamin's.

Like the brothers, sometimes we are tested with the identical temptation that felled us before, to see if we will sin again. But if we are truly repentant, we will not.

At the end of Jacob's life, in Genesis 50, he blesses each of his sons. And he says of Judah, **"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you....The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and the obedience of the nations is his."** (Genesis 50;8; 10). With those words Jacob prophesied that Judah would be the ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ...the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah". Judah turned his life around and changed. He is a great example for us because, unlike Joseph, Judah made plenty of mistakes. He was flawed. But in the end he was a changed man. And so can we be, by the grace of Christ.

Next we see that

## **II. Joseph Forgives His Brothers**

The next scene is the high point of all the chapters about Joseph's life. Look at chapter 45:1, where we see that

### **A. Joseph weeps**

**"Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, 'Have everyone leave my presence!' So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it."** (Genesis 45:1-2)

Here again we see Joseph's true nature. The charade that has gone on has been very taxing to him. To see if his brothers had truly changed he had to test them, giving them the opportunity to repeat the same sins...but they did not. Joseph appeared to be distant, but all the time he was intimately aware of the struggles the brothers had. Like Joseph, Christ sometimes seems to stand at a distance from us, watching to see if we truly have repented of sins that we did in the past, but he is right there, weeping with us in the joy of having overcome them.

Next,

### **B. Joseph explains**

**“And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Genesis 45:5-8)**

It is in these verses we see Joseph overcoming any unwillingness to forgive he might have struggled with. And he does it through good theology – by understanding the nature of God and his own part in the great human drama of the famine in Egypt. Against that big panorama Joseph’s own personal hurt diminishes and shrivels away. What happened to him in the past is just not important, if he can overcome it to glorify God through the saving of many people. And he did save many people – the Egyptians who ate the grain Joseph saved, and the Hebrews, who multiplied in Egypt for 400 years until the time came for God to send them back to Canaan through the Exodus.

Next,

### **C. Joseph restores**

In the next several verses Joseph explains to the situation to Pharaoh and secures his permission to move his brothers and father to Egypt. Joseph gives them gifts, grain and provisions, plus carts and donkeys. And don’t you find it funny that a few chapters ago they were worried that Joseph would attack them and **“seize us as slaves and take our donkeys.” (Genesis 43: 18)** Now look at them – they get ten extra male donkeys with carts to pull the gifts they’ve been given by Joseph, and ten extra female donkeys loaded with food and provisions for the journey. His last, perhaps tongue in cheek words to them are found in verse 24 of chapter 45: **“Don’t quarrel on the way!”**

**“So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. They told him, ‘Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.’ Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them. But when they told him everything Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, ‘I’m convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.’” (Genesis 45:25-28)**

What happens next will have to wait until next week, because right now I want to pause and look at the subject of forgiveness. We’ve seen that Joseph overcame the temptation to withhold forgiveness, because he had an extraordinary understanding of the nature of God and the purposeful quality of his sufferings. But how can we achieve that same understanding? How should we treat those who have sinned against us?

Let’s look at

### **III. Why We Must Forgive**

The bottom line about forgiveness as Christians is that it is not a choice.

We HAVE to forgive for two reasons. First,

#### **A. Because Christ forgave us**

**“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:13-14)**

Our forgiveness was the whole point of Jesus' death, because it reconciled us to God.

Second, we forgive:

**B. Because Christ commands us .**

**“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15)**

But forgiveness is difficult to do. As I've been preparing for this lecture I've been asked some interesting questions, and I'd like to end by answering them now.

Here are

#### **IV. Four Questions**

##### **1. Are there some things we cannot or should not forgive?**

The short answer is No. Christ has called us to this standard: **“But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:15)**. This is a scary standard, because it implies that we will not be able to keep begging forgiveness from God for our sins, which create a breach between us and him, unless we in turn are willing to extend that forgiveness to others. Now please understand that I'm talking about what happens after salvation. Once we belong to Christ we should gradually become more Christlike, a process called sanctification. Obviously, if we had to forgive someone before we could be initially forgiven by God, that would make our salvation dependent on something we did. And our salvation is dependent on nothing other than God's grace. But once we belong to Christ, it seems to me that this verse is pretty clear. There is really no loophole or exemption here. If we are to make progress in our spiritual life, we have to start grappling with forgiveness. And if we refuse to deal with forgiveness, then we're going to remain spiritual babies for the rest of our lives.

##### **2. Does Christ forgive everyone?**

We should forgive each other as Christ forgave us, but Christ does not actually forgive everyone, in the sense that not everyone accepts his offer of forgiveness. Does that mean that we are exempt from forgiving everyone?

First, we are not God. To sin against another person usually means offense or hurt - perhaps even grievously, like rape or abuse - but in the end, it is one human hurting another. To sin against God is different. It's not hurt. It's rebellion. That's what sin truly is - rebellion against God. So it stands to reason that there might be one standard of forgiveness for us and a different standard of forgiveness for God. If you rebel against the government, it carries severe punishment - sometimes the death penalty. How much more should we be in trouble when we rebel against the ultimate authority, God?

God is not a man, that he gets his feelings hurt when we sin against him. Rather, he is holy, and cannot look on our sin. So he finds the remedy for our rebellion in the death of his son Jesus Christ, who takes our punishment. That is what makes it possible for God to forgive those of us who turn to him in Christ, and also makes it possible for him not to forgive those who fail to recognize their rebellion against him.

Here is the standard we should exercise with each other when we sin against each other:

**“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph. 4:32).**

And here is the standard that explains what sin against God means, and why we need his forgiveness:

**“...do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” (Romans 2:4-5)**

God is God. He forgives who he will, and knows who will accept that forgiveness. We, on the other hand, are human, and are required to forgive all who sin against us, just as Christ looked around his unbelieving tormentors on the cross and groaned, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)**

### **3. Is forgiving the same as forgetting?**

These are two very distinct stages. Sometimes people ask, if I haven’t forgotten the hurt, have I truly forgiven? I can say that if true forgiveness takes place, a dulling of memory will also occur over time, in the sense that the sins that hurt us will assume less importance, and have less ability to destroy our joy in the present. But it’s a process, and it doesn’t happen right away.

### **4. How can we move towards forgiveness if we’re not there yet?**

I believe that we have to work on forgiveness by learning to see others as Christ sees them, and understanding that’s how Christ saw us before he forgave us. Once we learn to have compassion on them, then we can move towards forgiving them.

I have not been sinned against like some of you, and I want you to know that for those of you who suffered innocently at the hands of others, your faces are in front of me all the time as I write this. But I can talk about a situation in my own life, our daughter’s death, to illustrate what I am speaking of when I talk about moving toward forgiveness.

Our daughter Kirstie died by falling from a bridge when she was 16 months old. John and I were both present. He was on one side of a chain link fence lifting a bike over to me, as I stood on a narrow pedestrian bridge above a concrete wash in Pasadena. I had our daughter by the hand, but had to let go of her momentarily in order to receive the bike. Though we were standing on a bridge with open rails, I reasoned that the railings, being taller than she was, would make her safe for the few seconds that I let go. But she somehow climbed up and over in those few seconds, and fell to her death.

Now we live in a society that loves to affix blame. When the market crashes, we want to know who’s responsible. When hurricane Katrina devastates New Orleans, we don’t chalk it up to an act of God – we blame the administration who didn’t get aid there quickly enough. In this blame affixing culture, I had three choices: I could blame God for her death, I could blame my husband for his role in handing me a bike that made me let go of Kirstie, and I could blame myself for a truly horrendous lack of parenting. The fact was that, in a moral and legal sense, John and I were guilty of her death.

But here is how I broke free of the stranglehold of guilt and shame that would have killed me along with her in the months that followed Kirstie's death. First, I knew that God was a loving God who does not willingly afflict or grieve us (Lamentations 3:33). I also knew that God is a sovereign God who numbers our days (Psalm 139:16). Therefore I had no more power over her death in that situation than I did over her coming into being at her conception. So that took God out of the range of my blame.

Next, I knew that my husband John loved his daughter just as much as I loved her, and that he would have gladly given his life before seeing hers taken. I never blamed him. We were fellow sufferers in this tragedy and without each other we would not have survived.

But that left me. And I knew in a logical, seemingly objective sense, that I was the one who let go of her hand and didn't reach her in time. So how do you recover from the shame of the worst thing you have ever done in your life? You have to understand the nature of forgiveness.

You see, the act of forgiveness comes from the author of forgiveness...Jesus Christ. Jesus was willing to lay down his life. In response he was tortured, spat on and reviled at the cross where he was completing this act of self sacrifice. It wasn't as though he was applauded, welcomed or thanked. On the contrary, no one understood what he was doing. Even his mother and his beloved friend John stood beneath his cross, totally befuddled by this turn of events. They weren't thanking him for his sacrifice at that moment; all they were thinking of was their own sorrow and the horror of his suffering.

Now our understanding of forgiveness comes when we recognize, through some "Aha!" moment in our lives, what it means to be forgiven by Jesus. And that usually comes after we begin to understand how despicable we've been. We don't all need to be axe murderers to grasp the amazing nature of forgiveness. Most of us have lived lives that externally appear to be decent, moral and loving. But only you and I and Christ, can know our hearts and what goes on inside. I know what my true motives are, and how far my rebellion against God's design for me permeates my life, my thoughts and my actions. Remember that sin is truly rebellion, not just wrongdoing. So it is only when we see ourselves as completely sinful, that we understand our need of a savior, and consequently, the debt we owe Jesus Christ for having forgiven us all that. Remember, he didn't die for us because we were nice, attractive and lovable. He died for us because we were sinful and awful. But his death MADE us into something that begins to resemble him. So if Christ is lovable, then we can be too, because we bear his righteousness.

So what does this have to do with forgiveness? We cannot forgive others until we understand on a deep and visceral level what we've been forgiven from. And when I talk about forgiveness, I include forgiving ourselves. If we continue to blame and to shame ourselves for things we did in the past, we are withholding forgiveness from ourselves in a way that God does not! How can we trump God's mercy by refusing to forgive ourselves? That is what finally got me out of the mire of suffering after Kirstie's death...understanding that God had forgiven me, so I had no right to withhold forgiveness from myself.

And it works the same in every other situation that requires forgiveness. Until we step back and try to view the big picture, we will not understand that we cannot hold back forgiveness. That's what Joseph did, after all.

I mean this in the most radically possible way. Forgiveness begins with the simple statement, “I forgive you.” But it means that the initial statement will be followed by some evidence that true forgiveness has taken place – maybe not a relationship, but at least thawing, or civility. And true forgiveness will also be accompanied by a willingness to pray for that one who wronged you, because in prayer you will start to see them through Jesus’ eyes. And once you see them like Christ does you will begin to forgive them as Christ does. There are no guarantees of healing, but there is the guarantee that we will continue to be forgiven by God for our sins as we continue to forgive others.

I believe Jesus was able to forgive us because he felt compassion and pity for us. And I think that the only way we have any possibility of forgiveness is by viewing our enemies as Christ viewed us. I tried to think of the worst possible thing I might have to forgive another human for. To forgive someone who had murdered my child would be the worst. But by God’s grace I did eventually forgive myself for that very thing, because I understood that he had forgiven me first.

Now there are many practical things I could tell you about forgiveness. It’s not a feeling – you may not feel particularly forgiving. Rather, it’s an act of obedience towards God, to whom you owe that obedience. To forgive doesn’t make light of the hurt or carnage that has been done in your life. You were really and truly harmed. But we’re warned that if we withhold forgiveness, our Christian experience will be one of bitterness. We shrivel up inside when we don’t understand the relationship between forgiveness and growth.

And then there is the outcome. When there is an extraordinary act of forgiveness, there is also an extraordinarily powerful illustration of the truth of the Christian faith. Now there’s something that makes people stand up and listen. By your forgiveness you have just illustrated what Christ is all about. You have spoken volumes about the reality of Christ. And that, my friend, is more powerful than anything else we could do or say about faith.

Here is how Paul explains it: **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5: 17-19)**

We were reconciled. We want to reconcile others, to ourselves and to God. That starts with pity and compassion, commences with forgiveness, and ends with reconciliation. May we be reconcilers in this world who know how to forgive because we know we’ve been forgiven.

## Discussion Questions for Overcoming an Unwillingness to Forgive

- 1. Describe what your reaction would have been in Joseph's shoes. Would you have revealed yourself right away? Punished your brothers? What might you have done differently than Joseph and why?**
- 2. If you have been in a situation that required serious forgiveness, what did you do to bring yourself to the point of forgiving someone who had really wronged you? Did the act of forgiveness restore the relationship between you or not? Describe some practical steps we can take to prepare ourselves for the act of forgiveness.**
- 3. What does Jesus' life teach us about forgiveness? If forgiveness is something which is distinctly Christian how does that make Christianity different than other religions?**

## Study Questions for Overcoming an Unwillingness to Forgive

**Key verse for this passage: "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (Genesis 45:5)**

- 1. What reasons can you give for Joseph's actions with the silver cup and the money? Was he just tormenting his brothers or was there a more benign reason? Do you think Joseph would have accomplished the same outcome (forgiveness and reconciliation) if he had revealed himself to his brothers when he first saw them?**
- 2. Judah's actions in Genesis 44:18-34 are commendable. Look in some of Genesis' earlier chapters to see other descriptions of Judah's behavior. What has changed in him since the incident with Tamar in Genesis 38? Now look at Judah's blessing in Genesis 49:8-12. What does God predict about Judah and his descendents in this blessing?**
- 3. Christ himself gave the best example of forgiveness the world has ever known. Find two pieces of advice from the N.T. about forgiveness. Can we truly follow Christ if there is someone we refuse to forgive? Why or why not?**
- 4. Describe Jacob's behavior in these two chapters. How would you characterize his actions – honorable, loving, manipulative? Give examples from the text to justify your description. What finally made him agree to let his sons return to Egypt?**
- 5. What did the sin against Joseph (his brothers selling him into slavery) eventually accomplish, either in his life, in his brothers' lives, or in the lives of two nations (Canaan and Egypt)? Name at least 3 outcomes, with references.**
- 6. In your life, has great hardship or suffering produced good? Think of an example in your life or someone else's of this pattern. What is one biblical reason that God would use suffering to produce good?**