

Text: Genesis 45:3-8,15.

Epiphany 7.

February 24, 2019.

God's planned your forgiveness by sending his Son to the cross. Amen.

Could you forgive? What if this were your true life story? Your father has two wives. Could you forgive him? And he has sons by two other women. Twelve sons by four women altogether. You are the youngest for much of your life. Those of us who are older siblings know how badly mom and dad spoil the youngest. Could you forgive? Dad clearly has a favorite wife. You are the only son of this favorite wife. So you are his favorite son and the youngest son. And dad makes it painfully obvious you are his favorite. Instead of hand-me-downs we would normally think of for the youngest, you get the best, newest jacket. Could you forgive your father for such blatant favoritism?

You might think this favoritism makes your life easier, but not when it comes to your brothers. They hate you. They can't stand the sight of you. Even when they see you coming they start grumbling. They are sick of you and your fancy jacket. Could you forgive them for treating you this way, not just as a child, but even when you are a teenager and they are all adults? Could you forgive them? Well, one day this all comes to head. Your brothers see you in the distance. They come up with a plan to get rid of you and your despised jacket. They throw you into a pit. A pit! Could you forgive them? Then they pull you out and sell you as a slave. A slave! They sell you, their own brother, for a few coins. Could you forgive them? Would you ever forgive them? They sold you as a slave. Then sat down and ate lunch like selling you was no big deal, dipped your jacket in blood and made your father believe you were dead. Well, you might have well have been dead. You were dead to them. Would they be dead to you? Could you forgive?

And what about these brothers? They carry around decades of guilt for selling their brother. They actually carry that guilt longer than their father is alive. I don't like the expression, "forgive yourself," because it makes it sound like you are playing God's role in forgiving. But could these brothers ever see God's forgiveness? Is there any way out from their sin, their guilt? Could God forgive them?

This true to life account, taken right from the pages of the Bible, really saddens me. Yes, because it's so sad what the brothers did. But it saddens me more deeply, because I have acted like that father playing favorites. Would any of your children ever think that you had a favorite child? And could your children forgive you? Could God ever forgive me? I have acted like the brothers. Jealous when someone else gets a gift. Could God forgive me? How did you feel at Christmas when others opened presents? How do you feel at someone else's birthday party? Do the bigger houses down the street make the jackal of jealousy arise in your own hearts? Could God ever forgive you? Have you ever sold out God for a few coins? I have to work. No time for God's Word. I have to make money. No time for God. Could God forgive you? Maybe you felt most like the brothers. I have sold out God. And I don't think I can ever forgive myself. I don't think God can ever forgive me. Who would forgive me for selling out God? It can't be done.

And yet, God did it! God forgave you. God forgave the guilt of your sin. Yes. It's true. God forgave the guilt of your sin. God nailed Jesus to the cross. God put your sins on Jesus. God forgave them all! God has forgiven you for all the times you sold him out. God has forgiven the times you played favorites. God has forgiven your jealousy. Need proof? Look at your baptism. God declared you his forgiven child. Was that too long ago? How about Jesus' true body and true blood, right on your lips. Right on your heart. God has forgiven you. God has forgiven you. God has forgiven you.

We are just seeing a snippet of a bigger account from the Bible. Joseph was that youngest son, well, youngest for most of his life until the final brother came along. There were ten other brothers and a favorite playing father named Jacob. After Joseph was sold into slavery, God didn't stop working. God started. Joseph worked for a man who was a high official in the government in Egypt. Joseph was doing pretty well. Then Joseph was falsely accused of trying to sleep with his boss' wife. That got Joseph in prison. Unfairly. While in prison God gives Joseph the ability to interpret the dreams of two fellow prisoners who worked for the king of Egypt, Pharaoh. One of these servants of the king eventually remembers Joseph when Pharaoh has dreams of his own. God gives Joseph the ability to interpret the dreams, which predicted seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Pharaoh elevates Joseph to second in command. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy food. They bow down to Joseph. They don't have a clue it's their brother. They thought he was dead. Certainly not the second in command in the greatest empire on earth in Egypt. But Joseph recognized them. Would he forgive? Did he remember their hatred, their jealousy, their throwing him into a pit, their selling him into slavery and leaving him for dead? Would he remember? Would he forgive?

Our reading is the moment in this true to life account when Joseph reveals his identity to them. "I am Joseph. Is my father still living?" What? You can understand why the brothers can't say a word. What? This is the last person on earth they are expecting to see. Could Joseph forgive them? Look at the Bible! He dwells on the present. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive? Come close to me. I am your brother." He doesn't dwell on the past. He doesn't dwell on their sins. He dwells on forgiveness. Sound like God? Jesus doesn't dwell on your past, your sins. He dwells on the present. You are forgiven. You stand forgiven. Could God forgive? Definitely. Could Joseph forgive? Absolutely!

Joseph had the power to punish them. He was second in command in the most powerful nation on earth. His brothers were beggars asking for food. How does Joseph use that power? To forgive them! To provide for them. Joseph later gives them not only food, but carts to go back home and bring all their stuff to Egypt, where there was food. Joseph arranged for them to have the best part of the land of Egypt, perfect for their profession. How does God use his power? To forgive! To provide! Clothing that fills our closets. And food that more than fills our stomachs. God is the highest power in all the universe and he uses that power to forgive, to provide.

Joseph didn't want his brothers to carry one gram of guilt. Not one gram! Even before they can say anything, even before they ask forgiveness, Joseph says, "Do not be distressed. Do not be angry with yourselves." Dudes, don't worry about it. I'm not distressed. I'm not angry with you. I'm not worried about it. I'm sure you've been killing yourselves for decades. Stop. I've forgiven you. God has forgiven you.

Is God the same with us? Yes! He forgave the guilt of my sin. Not just the sin itself, but what is often worse, the guilt that follows after sin. God gave the guilt to Jesus. God treated Jesus like the guilty one. Now God treats you like the innocent one. Do not be distressed. Do not be angry with yourselves. God has forgiven you. God has forgiven you. God has forgiven you. I know the guilty heart can never hear that enough. God has forgiven you.

You see, while the verses in this chapter are part of a larger account of the life of Joseph, they are but a small part of an even larger account of the life of Jesus. God had a bigger plan for the life of Joseph. That plan was to use Joseph and Joseph's family to keep alive God's promise to send a Savior. Wow are there some ups and downs in the life of Joseph to understate it. But God brought Joseph to forgive. God

helped Joseph see God's bigger plan. God helped Joseph see how God used even the sins of Joseph's brothers to carry out God's plan. And Joseph not only forgave his brothers for their sins. Joseph saw how God's greater plan was carried out. In the same way, God used even the sins of Jesus' enemies to carry out God's greater plan to forgive the sins of all the world. Jesus forgave the sins that put Jesus on the cross. Jesus forgave the sins that God used to carry out God's plan. God's forgiveness is so amazing. We never have to wonder, "Could God forgive? Will God forgive?" Jesus even said from the cross, first thing he said, to God, about those people who put nails through his hands, "Father, forgive them."

Look how Joseph talks. No bitterness. No revenge. Just forgiveness. God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant. A remnant refers to survivors of a great catastrophe. We are the survivors of the great catastrophe of sin. God saved your lives by a great deliverance. Is that God talking? Is that Joseph talking? Hard to tell, right? They are the words of Joseph. Joseph being in this great position allowed him to save the lives of his brothers, I know extend their lives on earth, by the great deliverance of providing food and land. God saved our lives, yes saved for all eternity, by a much greater deliverance, the death of Jesus on the cross. The cross is our great deliverance.

There's one more thing to point out about Joseph's forgiveness. He not only forgave. He saw God's hand working. Three times Joseph says, "God sent me." Did you catch those three times? Verse five. God sent me ahead of you. Verse seven. God sent me ahead of you. And in case you missed it. Clearly again in verse eight. It was not you who sent me here, but God. Three times, the number of God. God used jealousy and slavery and false accusations and prison and decades. But God sent me here. Amazing forgiveness.

And would you believe this true to life account even does have a happy ending? Joseph's entire extended family, moves to Egypt and is spared during the famine. Much later, Jacob, Joseph's father, dies and goes to heaven. The brothers think, "Now Joseph is really going to get back at us." They go to Joseph and say, "Dad said you are supposed to forgive us." Joseph cries that they didn't hear him the first time. He reassured them. He spoke kindly to them. He promised to continue to provide for them. And he even said, "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the extending of many lives." Full forgiveness. Free forgiveness. Forget about it forgiveness. I've forgotten about it. I've forgiven it. I've seen God working good.

I suppose it's good if we go back to our theme question, "Could you forgive?" Put yourself in Joseph's sandals. Could you forgive? Could you see God's hand? Put yourself in Jesus' sandals. Could he forgive? Does he forgive? Yes! Jesus forgives. Just because he loves us. Christ's love compels us to love and forgive others. Could you forgive? Yes! Christ's love strengthens me to forgive others. Could you forgive? I look at Joseph and his Christ-focused love inspires me to answer, "yes!" Because of Jesus I can forgive. I will forgive. Amen.

God sent Jesus ahead of you into heaven. By his forgiveness, you will join Jesus there. Amen.