

West Van Baptist, May 31
Family Foundations – The Power of Letting It Go
The Joseph Story, Gen 37-50

I. Introductory comments

We're going to do things a little differently this morning. Today's message comes from the story of Joseph and his brothers, which runs from Genesis 37 through 50. It's a familiar account for most of us, though some who are new to the Bible may not know it well. It's important that we have the whole narrative in view. That's way too much reading for Sunday morning. So instead of doing our usual Scripture reading, I've asked a team to take us through a quick overview of the story.

II. The Joseph story (an overview from Genesis 30 and 37-50)

Abraham's grandson Jacob had 2 wives and 2 concubines (that is, legal mistresses). Jacob's favorite wife and first love, Rachel, was unable to have children for a long time. In contrast, the other 3 women had 10 sons.

Finally, God heard Rachel's prayers and gave her 2 boys: Joseph and Benjamin.

Of all his sons, Jacob loved Joseph most. He treated Joseph with special favor, giving him gifts including an expensive multi-colored robe. He would send the boy out to supervise the others when they cared for the flocks and herds, and paid special attention to his reports even when they made his brothers look bad. Needless to say, the older brothers grew to hate Joseph.

Then Joseph began to have dreams. In these, he saw visions that he would one day rule over the rest of the family. Hearing about these dreams, the others became even more resentful.

When Joseph was about 17, his older brothers took the flocks on an 80 km journey north toward Galilee, where the grass was better for grazing. Jacob wanted a report on their progress, so once again he sent Joseph to see how things were going.

The brothers saw Joseph coming, beautiful coat shining in the sun. They said to one another: "I'm sick of him. Let's kill him and throw his body into a pit." The eldest—Reuben—talked the rest out of this extreme action. Instead, they sold him to a passing caravan of slave-traders who were heading south to Egypt. So Joseph became a slave in Egypt.

Joseph was purchased by a royal official, Potiphar, captain of the Egyptian guard, and put to work in Potiphar's palace. It was soon clear to everyone that Joseph was wise and skillful, that God was with him, giving him success in everything. So Joseph received more responsibility and authority, until he became the chief servant in the household.

Joseph was handsome and well-spoken, and soon Potiphar's wife took notice of him. She tried to entice Joseph to sleep with her. He refused, saying, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"

Rejected and angry, Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attacking her. Her husband was furious and threw Joseph into prison. Yet even there, God was with him, helping and bringing success. Before long the chief jailor put Joseph in charge of caring for the other prisoners.

Some time later, Pharaoh threw two of his officials into prison: his butler and his baker. While in prison, both men woke up very disturbed by strange dreams that seemed meaningful but confusing. In response to their concerns, Joseph said, "Interpretations belong to God. Tell me your dreams and I will ask God what they mean."

The baker's dream was bad news. Three days later, on Pharaoh's birthday, he would be executed. But the butler's dream was good news: 3 days later he would be pardoned and restored to his role in Pharaoh's court.

Joseph gave the interpretation to each, and he implored the butler: "Please, when you are back at the court, remember me and ask Pharaoh to free me. I was falsely accused."

However, the butler forgot all about Joseph, who spent another 2 years in prison.

Finally there came a day when Pharaoh started to have dreams. He saw cows and heads of grain, prosperity and drought. What could it all mean? He was deeply disturbed. Then the butler remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh that he knew a man who could interpret dreams.

The officials took Joseph from prison, cleaned him up, and brought him to Pharaoh. Listening to the dreams, Joseph said: "I can't interpret these, but God can, and He will tell us what they mean."

They learned that the dreams spoke of 7 years of great abundance, followed by 7 years of severe famine. Joseph pointed out that God had given these dreams as a warning, so Pharaoh could store up food during the plentiful times and share it when things were hard.

Pharaoh saw wisdom in this—and wisdom in Joseph! So he made Joseph second-in-command over the kingdom, giving him power to gather and distribute food. Joseph built storehouses, requiring the people to save huge amounts during the first 7 years of plenty. Then when the famine began, the nations all around struggled to find food, but there was plenty in the storehouses in Egypt.

The famine extended all the way to Canaan, where Jacob and his family lived. When their supplies ran thin, Jacob sent his 10 oldest sons to Egypt to buy grain. He kept the youngest, Benjamin, safe at home, protecting him as Rachel's only remaining son.

The brothers would make 2 trips to Egypt. They were received as wealthy foreigners, and directed to the office of Joseph himself. They didn't recognize their brother—who was now 30, dressed and acting as an Egyptian prince. But Joseph recognized them immediately. He used this opportunity to help his brothers ... and also to test them.

He helped. He supplied them with food; and he instructed his servants to put their money back in their grain bags so that the food cost the family nothing.

And Joseph tested them. He accused his brothers of being spies. He asked many questions about their family back home, their father, and their younger brother. Then he said, "Prove that you're not spies. The next time you come for food, bring your little brother with you. Otherwise, don't return at all. Meanwhile, I will keep one of you in prison as security until you come again."

The brothers were in a predicament. Their father Jacob did not want them to take Benjamin to Egypt. On the other hand, they soon needed more food. So back they went with Benjamin in tow.

Again Joseph met them. He gave them food and freed their imprisoned brother. Again he returned their money, hidden in their bags. This time he also put a precious ceremonial cup in Benjamin's bag. Soon after the group left, he sent soldiers to catch them and bring them back, this time accusing them of theft. When the cup was found, Joseph declared that he would keep Benjamin as a slave, letting the other 10 go free.

This was a test. Did Joseph's brothers hate Benjamin as they had hated him? Would they use this as a convenient opportunity to get rid of Benjamin, as they had sold Joseph off? Had they changed at all, or were they still selfish and bitter?

The brothers were horrified. They begged Joseph not to keep Benjamin. Judah, the one who first suggested selling Joseph into slavery, now said, "Please, spare the boy. If you must put someone in prison, lock me up instead. I will take his place."

Joseph broke down and wept. He revealed himself, saying "I am your brother Joseph! And I forgive you for what you did to me; don't be upset or angry with yourselves about it. Look what God has done! He sent me here to help Egypt and the surrounding nations to survive this famine. He sent me here to help you and our family."

It was an amazing reunion. Joseph and his brothers were reconciled. They sent for the rest of the family to come and live in Egypt, where they were all well cared-for. Jacob spent his final years with all his sons including Joseph. After Jacob died, Joseph continued to care for his brothers, reassuring them that all was forgiven.

III. A story of forgiveness

Joseph is one of the Bible's great heroes. We can learn many lessons from him: about leadership, about integrity, about what dreams you should *not* share with your brothers. But I think that—at least for our current sermon series on the family—the most important lessons he teaches are about *forgiveness*.

Forgiveness doesn't sound exciting. Still, it's one of the most essential elements for healthy family life. In the family we live close to each other. We step on each other's toes. Share a bed with someone and you'll end up elbowing them in the head from time to time. I know. I've done it to Diane. Family members see each other's shortcomings so clearly, because we know each other so well. And because we care for our family members, they have the power to hurt us in ways no one else can.

All these things are true in the church family, too. Over time, brothers and sisters in Jesus become close. We spend many hours together. We have high expectations of one another. We also have

different points of view, and shortcomings, and we *do* step on each other's toes. We may not elbow one another in the head, yet we offend and hurt and disappoint one another.

So forgiveness is essential for us. Without it, all those other lessons about family living won't do us much good. That's why the Bible talks about forgiveness everywhere. It's especially clear in Jesus' teaching. But long years and many pages before the gospels, we learn lessons about forgiveness from Joseph.

What is forgiveness?

In the Bible forgiveness boils down to one main thing: "letting go." (In fact, that's essentially what the Greek and Hebrew words mean.)

(1) Forgiveness "lets go" of the right to expect personal payback.

I've said this before: in the biblical world "forgiving" was a financial term. It describes releasing a person from debt. More broadly, when someone hurts or wrongs me, I naturally feel that they "owe" me something. Certainly an apology. Perhaps I want some kind of additional payback. Or maybe I feel the person should be "made to pay" by suffering themselves.

When I forgive, I let go of this sense that I can demand payback. Instead I adopt the attitude that the other person owes me nothing for what they've done. I give away all my supposed rights to expect that they will suffer, or compensate me, or even apologize.

Joseph illustrates this beautifully. His brothers hurt him far beyond what most of us will ever experience. It would have been easy for him to daydream about punishing them. As a ruler in Egypt, he could have actually punished them any way he wished. Instead—Joseph let it go. Before his brothers ever knew who he was, before they ever felt remorse or asked forgiveness, Joseph had already chosen to forgive. When they appeared at his door, he helped them. Never once did he demand anything from them to repay a debt they owed. He let go of the right to personal payback.

(2) Forgiveness "lets go" of the anger and bitterness that comes from being wronged or hurt.

Letting go of payback opens the door to reconciliation. Beyond that, when we let go of the angry and bitter emotions that come when we're hurt, we pave the way to our own healing.

Now, emotions are tricky things. They come on us unbidden, and we don't have complete control over them. A person who has been hurt or wronged *will* feel upset and angry. This isn't a sin. It's just life. (We learn this from the Psalms, which include plenty of unhappy emotions.)

Still, we have a choice. We can feed those angry, bitter feelings, brooding on them, allowing them to fester and grow. Or, we can determine to move beyond them, asking God to help us let them go. Praying for peace. Praying for those who have hurt us—which is an excellent medicine for bitterness, as well as a command in Scripture. (Remember Jesus' words: *Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you*—Lk 6:27-28.)

Some years ago Diane and I met a woman at church who had a beautiful, gentle spirit. It was a delight to worship with her, and we respected her gracious, godly character. One day I ran into her at school, which was surprising since she wasn't taking courses. I learned that a fellow faculty

member from the counseling program had invited her to share her personal story in his class. He was teaching on forgiveness, and it turned out she had quite a story. Her brother had burned down their family's home, killing her parents and severely burning her.

This happened some years before. Our friend had healed physically. She had also forgiven, which allowed her to heal emotionally and spiritually. She could have become a bitter, angry, prickly grouch. Instead, forgiveness formed the character of Jesus in her, and she had become a wonderful person.

No one burned Joseph's tent down. But his brothers sold him into slavery, and he spent 12 years as a slave and prisoner in a foreign country. Joseph had plenty of reasons to be angry and bitter. Instead he learned to let those emotions go. When he met his brothers, tears flowed freely. Yet the emotion wasn't hate. It was compassion and amazement at the way God was restoring his badly broken family.

Joseph teaches us about forgiveness—about letting it go.

IV. Lessons on forgiveness from Joseph

Let's make this even more practical. I see 5 specific lessons on forgiveness that help to make the Joseph story relevant to us today.

(1) Forgiveness is about me, not the other person

Biblical forgiveness is not driven by what the other person who has offended me does or doesn't do. It doesn't depend on whether they repent, or apologize, or suffer, or pay me back. For followers of Jesus, forgiveness flows out of our own inner character, as His attitude is replicated in us. Remember: when Jesus was crucified, He looked out at the people who attacked and condemned and abused Him—none of whom was repentant—and He said: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

Of course, if others have wronged us, they should feel remorse, repent and apologize. If we've hurt someone else, even unintentionally, of course we should try to make things right. It's the right thing to do, and it's essential if a broken relationship is to be fully healed. But that's not the point of this morning's message. Today we're talking about forgiveness, which is not the same thing as reconciliation. Jesus forgave those who crucified Him. That doesn't mean they were all reconciled to Him.

Forgiveness is the necessary first step in healing a relationship—and forgiveness does *not* require a change of heart in the other person. It often encourages a change. But forgiveness needs to flow out from inside me, whether or not there is a change. Again, Joseph let go of anger and bitterness and payback from his brothers and extended grace to them before they ever knew who he was.

Too often people are unable to reconcile because they sit opposite one another, scowling in anger and bitterness, each waiting for the other person to take the first step to apologize and make amends. "I'll forgive once they do such-and-such," we say. Neither is willing to make that move, so there is no healing. It happens all the time, in families and even in church families where forgiveness isn't clearly understood.

Forgiveness alone doesn't solve everything. By itself, forgiveness doesn't guarantee reconciliation. But it unlocks the door. It says, "I will care and be gracious, open to relationship with you no matter how you respond." Forgiveness flushes away the gasoline from the accident scene, so that the emergency crew can begin to deal with the car wreck without having to worry that everything will burst into flames.

(2) Forgiveness is not forgetting or ignoring consequences

This point balances the previous one. Joseph didn't require anything from his brothers before he forgave them. However, he did test them. Were they still the same selfish, cruel men they had been when they debated killing him? Would they try to get rid of their brother Benjamin too? Had they changed at all?

These tests weren't about forgiveness. They were about *trust*. Forgiveness flows from inside, and it is given freely. Trust must be earned. If someone steals from me, I need to forgive them; but it may be a while before I trust them with my house keys or the combination to the safe. If someone has been abusive, the victim needs to forgive; but she may also need to keep a safe distance. Forgiveness is the beginning of healing, not the end of the process.

Sometimes in the church and in Christian families we underestimate how much time and effort will be needed to bring complete healing. I've heard people say: "You call yourself a Christian. You should just forgive and move past all that has happened." Yes, we should forgive. But there may still be a need for counseling. There will almost always have to be conversation—sometimes difficult conversation. Relationships take time to heal, and forgiven people don't always change immediately. We're called to be wise as well as gracious.

Diane forgives me when I roll over in bed and elbow her on the head. She also moves a little further away where my elbow doesn't reach. Forgiveness lets us stay together and keep loving each other. Wisdom helps her to avoid headaches.

Forgiveness doesn't make the past evaporate. We still remember things that have happened. They may still have consequences, and it may take time and effort to reconcile and rebuild trust. But forgiveness is the essential first step on that path. It tears down the walls that pain builds around my heart.

(3) Forgiveness requires faith

Did you notice what Joseph said to his brothers—on 2 separate occasions!—when he forgave them?

"God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you!" (Gen 45:7-8)

"Don't be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." (Gen 50:20)

Joseph understood that behind the actions of his brothers, God was at work. God permitted those things to happen, and He was using them for a good purpose no one could have anticipated. This didn't excuse what his brothers chose to do. But it put everything in a different perspective.

When people don't believe in God and they have no confidence that He is ultimately in control, they will be overwhelmed by pain and difficulty. All they have in life are their own feelings and circumstances. So if things go badly and people are unkind, it's a catastrophe.

But if we really believe a powerful, good, wise God is at work in and behind what is happening, then we can have confidence that in the end things will turn out for the best—even if we don't see it now. We can trust Him, and find peace in that trust. In fact, our ability to trust in this way is an important part of our worship.

It's hard—maybe impossible—to forgive without a deep, well-informed faith in God. On the other side, real forgiveness is a mark of genuine biblical faith. It's why Jesus commands us to forgive. It's why the Lord's Prayer includes the line: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*. It's why the Bible constantly urges us to become good forgivers.

It's essential for healthy family life. One of the most powerful things we can do to help each other grow in our families—and in our church family—is to model real forgiveness. When people see us forgive as an act of trust in God, they learn to have faith. On the other hand, if we fail to forgive, our friends and family see that too, and it tempts them to think our faith is just empty talk. Forgiveness is powerful, and essential.

(4) Forgiveness is a journey, not a one-time decision

Sometimes we make forgiveness sound very easy. Just say "I forgive you," and *poof!* It's all done.

That's not how it works in real life. Real people injure us over and over, especially when we live close together. (How many times have I elbowed Diane in the head?) That's why Jesus stressed that we need to keep on forgiving: "70 x 7 times" (Mat 18:22).

Even if I'm only hurt once, the memory keeps coming back, as do those negative feelings. I wonder how many mornings Joseph woke up in prison feeling the urge to hate his brothers for what they'd done once? After revealing himself and reconciling with them, Joseph still had to reassure his brothers on several occasions that things were now OK. When the hurt is deep, forgiveness isn't something you do once-for-all. It's a discipline, a decision you must keep making again and again.

Nowhere is this more true than in our families. I can quickly forgive the jerk who cut me off in traffic. I'll never see him again. But I live with family. We visit over and over. As a church family, we see each other this week, and next week, and the week after. So when forgiveness is needed, we can expect that we'll need to keep choosing it again and again. That's OK. That's how life works. It's how *faith* works. It's why the Christian life is called a "walk," not a switch you flip on and off.

(5) Forgiveness is ... very good!

Forgiveness is not easy. But it's very good.

Imagine how different the Bible's story would be if Joseph hadn't forgiven. So much for the 12 tribes of Israel. So much for God's promise through Abraham. So much for our respect for Joseph.

This story could have ended as a flaming, tragic mess. Instead? We read about a family reconciled and relationships healed. We see grace and kindness and Christlike love, celebrated with overflowing joy.

In my life I've seen and experienced times of forgiveness and reconciliation. Most of you have, too. Every one of those times was joyful and beautiful. Few things demonstrate the power of God's goodness as clearly as forgiveness extended in place of anger and bitterness.

Friends, our families don't need to be perfect to be joyful. Our church family doesn't need to be perfect to be joyful. We're fallen, and we will step on each other's toes and elbow one another from time to time. But as we learn forgiveness, we will find that God can bring joy and celebration even through our failures. And that's very good!

So ... Forgiveness is about me, not the other person. It doesn't mean ignoring consequences. It requires faith. It's a journey. And it's very good!

We learn these things from Joseph. Can I add one last point that isn't in the Joseph story? It's something we learn from Jesus—though I know Joseph would approve.

In Matthew 18 Jesus told a story about a ruler whose slave owed him a great debt—more than he could ever repay, something like a billion dollars. The slave was crushed under this, and begged for forgiveness. So the ruler, whose heart was merciful, forgave him.

That slave had a co-worker who owed him a much smaller debt—something like \$15,000. His debtor begged for mercy; but the slave hardened his heart and threw his co-worker into prison.

When the ruler heard about this he was furious. He changed his mind and put the first slave into prison after all. Having been forgiven such a great debt, this man should have shown grace to the other.

Brothers and sisters, God has forgiven us all for a great debt. Our sin—our selfishness and pride and disobedience—put God's Son Jesus on the cross. There is literally nothing anyone could ever do to wrong us that compares to the grief and pain we have caused Jesus. We all owe a great, great debt. And God, whose heart is full of mercy, willingly and freely forgives and reconciles with anyone who asks.

That should fill our hearts with joy. And it should motivate us to follow our Lord's example, imaging Him, learning to forgive when others offend us.

There is wonderful joy and awesome power in forgiveness—in "letting it go." May we all continue to grow in this discipline, in our families and church, this week and always.