

Remember how the brothers sold Joseph when he was young? The brothers remembered too. They were afraid of revenge after their father, Jacob died.

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!” So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father charged before he died, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong. And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.”’

And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

The brothers of Joseph have lived with what they did to him for many years. To refresh, they sold him into slavery at a young age, which brought Joseph to Egypt where he now reigned with Pharaoh. Joseph seemed to have forgiven them – but they didn’t understand his attitude. And to be candid, we might not either.

A poet named Heinrich Heine once said, "My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and a few trees beside my door. Then, if God wanted to make me completely happy, he would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all the wrongs they have done me - forgive them from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged!"

Now that, we understand. But not someone like Joseph. I mean, we “get it,” and we like it when we are the ones being forgiven, but to turn around and release forgiveness to someone who gossiped about you, or took steps to make your life worse, the equivalent of throwing you into a well like Joseph’s brothers did, that’s hard to take. Forgiveness isn’t easy. Sometimes it’s the most difficult thing in the world.

How was Joseph able to find the resources to forgive? In his case, I think it comes down to this: Joseph had gained an understanding that God was in control and had led him on this path.

The brothers couldn’t link the pieces together but Joseph did. Their planning to kill him and then later deciding to sell him into slavery was a sin. It was horrible, no question! But this action resulted in many lives being saved in Egypt. It got Joseph to where he needed to be and enabled him to rise through the ranks of government on the strength of his God-given abilities. Using those gifts, Joseph ensured that the country was well-stocked when famine hit, and was so well-supplied that they could help others in need. It also brought about reconciliation for his own family, including the lives of his father and brothers.

Maybe there are some ways you can relate to Joseph. Have you ever been wronged, made to feel awkward? At those times, it can be hard to see God's work in progress. But with the passage of time, you then look back and realize that the circumstance you found yourself in, through not much fault of your own, was exactly where you needed to be at that time in your life. And holding God's hand in faith, you are moved to say, with Joseph, "God meant it for good." God uses these things to educate, humble and strengthen us. We all need "bumps in the road" from time to time to bring us closer to God.

Joseph's brothers found it difficult to believe that he could actually forgive them for this horrendous act. But he did. A terrible act of betrayal was forgiven and their needs were graciously met. It is a beautiful picture of mercy and forgiveness. It perfectly illustrates what's going on throughout the entire story of Scripture. Because God does the same for us. For you, For me.

But please know this: forgiveness is never easy and it is always costly. Even for God. Maybe especially for God. Because when I am called to forgive, what's the price I have to pay? I have to pay by letting go of a need to 'see my enemies hang.' I have to let go of what I think I am owed. And it's hard! But, I don't have to die in order to forgive. Jesus did.

Do you understand? Jesus didn't have to just swallow his pride; he had to swallow the poison of human sin, all of it, it poured into him. It became His. It was so bad, it killed him. And unless you believe that your sins were part of that poisonous brew, the deep and true forgiveness that Jesus offers will escape you. Or consider this: for the good news of Jesus to have an emotional impact on you, you have to believe that you have done and thought and said things at least as bad as Joseph's brothers. If you say in your heart of hearts, well, I've never done anything that bad, then the costly price of Jesus' death is just a plot point to you. No wonder you have a problem forgiving other people. But if your conscience is telling you that you've done damage to other people and hurt them in ways that bother your conscience, this news of Jesus' costly crucifixion is beautiful for you. It's unexpected—the gospel always has a surprising ring to it. Because God has us dead to rights, and if he gave us what we deserve, we would receive misery upon misery for the pain that we have caused. But all that misery was poured into Jesus on the cross, and he paid for it there, so that the King can come out to you, and throw his arms around you with happy tears, and promise to provide for you and yours.

This means that you have an infinitely better forgiveness resource than Joseph had. You live on another side of Jesus' cross; more importantly, this Jesus has joined Himself to you by baptism and faith. There are times where you may not feel that you have it in you to forgive—and you may be right! But Jesus does. His death and resurrection ensures it. So defer to him. Get out of his way. Let Jesus be the one offering forgiveness through you. It is the way to health and peace for you and grace that changes the world.