

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: Relying on God"  
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 50:15-21  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 31, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Several years ago, my parents described to me an unfortunate situation in their church. They told me that a man from their congregation had died. One of his sons then contacted the pastor and asked him to perform a memorial and graveside service on a particular day. The pastor agreed. Then some other children of the deceased church member called the pastor and asked him to perform a second memorial service on a different day. My parents were among the church members who dutifully showed up for one or the other or both of those services. The double funeral arrangement wasn't because of impossibly tight schedules. Like too many families I've seen at times of death, old conflicts had seriously strained the family's ability and desire to coordinate their plans. Instead of coming together in a supportive celebration of their father's life, unforgiveness kept them apart.

Even if *our* families aren't that fractured, we know that life is full of pain and troubles. We can allow those assaults to dictate our behavior, happiness, and relationships—or, preferably, we can forgive those old heartaches so we can move into a free and positive future. That's why I encouraged you to start 2021 with a New Year's resolution of forgiveness.

But, as you've heard me say repeatedly, there are many real challenges to forgiveness, and we have to consider what steps might have to come first. That's why we talked about the fact that, if we're dealing with danger, fleeing for our lives might be the first order of business. As we've been reading the Genesis story of the family of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their 12 sons—and following the drama and trauma of those characters—we've also seen how Leah and Rachel approached forgiveness by wrestling with shame. We've seen how the 10 elder brothers worked on forgiveness by controlling their rage. Then, last Sunday, we read from Genesis 41 about how Joseph moved toward forgiveness by making

fruit from misfortune. All those were necessary steps along the path. Today, as we finish up this series, let's look at the end of this Genesis story and see how we might finally arrive at forgiveness by relying on God.

### **1—IN HUMILITY**

First of all, we see that Joseph and his brothers relied on God in humility. By the time we get to Genesis 50:15-18, famine had ravaged the land of Israel, and Joseph's brothers had travelled to Egypt in search of food. That's where they accidentally came across Joseph. They discovered that their brother, whom they had sold into slavery, was now in charge of the grain storage and distribution program for all of Egypt. Pharaoh had placed Joseph in a position of great power, and Joseph could easily have refused to help his brothers in order to get even with them. So the elder brothers weren't taking anything for granted. In great humility, they readily acknowledged that they had done wrong by Joseph. They begged for his forgiveness, and they wept, fell down, and referred to themselves as slaves and servants. They were willing to acknowledge their part in their family's troubles. They were willing to lower themselves in humility before Joseph and before God.

And it wasn't just Joseph's brothers who relied on God in humility. Joseph did too. Notice what he says to them in verse 19: "Don't be afraid! Am I in the place of God?" Joseph knew that, compared to God, he too was a lowly servant. Joseph was willing to forgive his brothers because he knew that he also was accountable to and dependent upon a power much higher than himself.

That same kind of forgiveness-through-relying-on-God-in-humility is found in the New Testament. The Letter of First John pulls no punches when it says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [But] if we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:8-9). We are eventually able to forgive each other not because we are so perfect, but because we first admit that we are in need of

God's forgiving mercy ourselves. Whether receiving or offering forgiveness, we begin by relying on God in humility.

## **2—IN CONFIDENCE**

Just because we need to lower ourselves a notch doesn't mean that we only grovel in our guilt, however. Forgiveness isn't only a matter of humility. Forgiveness also involves relying on God in confidence. When, in verse 17, Joseph's brothers asked him to please "forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father," the brothers were reminding Joseph that their God was also the God of their father Jacob, their grandfather Isaac, and their great grandfather Abraham. And, if you recall, Abraham's God was the one who had promised him the land of Israel and that his descendants would number as many as the stars of the sky.

Joseph may have been living in Egypt for a long time now, but he hadn't forgotten that covenant promise. Joseph grew up in his father's house and had heard all the stories. Joseph knew that God had something much bigger going on than their sibling rivalry. God had an amazing ability to transform bad situations and make fruit from misfortune. Joseph now realized that God intended to work through him to preserve not only the people of Egypt, but also the numerous descendants of Abraham. Joseph assured his brothers that they could all rely on God in that confidence.

Such relying-on-God confidence that enabled Joseph and his brothers to arrive at a place of forgiveness can help us today too. Earlier in the service we sang the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." The third verse asked the rhetorical question, "What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms?" In issues of forgiveness, sometimes we're afraid that, if we forgive, we'll get hurt more, or that justice won't be served. Maybe we worry that someone else will get the credit or that their agenda will prevail and ours will fall by the wayside. Or maybe we're afraid that someone we care about won't ever forgive us, and our relationship will never be restored. But, as our hymn tells us, if we're leaning on Jesus, we'll "have blessed peace with [our] Lord so near." So long as we're seeking

and trusting the bigger picture of God's will and purpose, we'll be "safe and secure from all alarms."<sup>1</sup> As followers of Christ, we talk a lot about trust, faith, and blessed assurance—that somehow God is going to make everything work out alright. We are able to arrive at forgiveness by relying on God in confidence.

### **3--TOGETHER**

In addition to relying on God in humility and confidence, there's a third aspect of this story that we should notice. In at least the best situations, forgiveness also comes through relying on God together. Of course there are times when forgiveness is a rather lonely place. Maybe the person we need to forgive has already died. Maybe the person who needed to forgive us is already gone. Maybe reconciliation will never be possible in this life because of on-going danger or because too much water has passed under that bridge. So we may have to work out our forgiveness issues just between us and God.

But, in the very best cases, forgiveness allows us to restore relationships from the past or invest in future relationships together. In Genesis 50, the brothers could have been so afraid of Joseph that they retreated and hid from him. Instead, verse 16 says they "approached" him. Alternate translations say they "commanded" him or they "sent word to" him. All those different translations imply that they made an effort to engage with Joseph, so they could have a positive future together.

Likewise, in verse 21, Joseph tells his brothers not to fear and that he will provide for them and their children. "He reassured them, speaking kindly to them." If we were to read to the end of the chapter, we would also see that Joseph asked his relatives to do something for him after his death. He told them that, one day, God would lead them back to their promised homeland. When that happens, "Carry my bones there with you," he asked. By making that request, Joseph was indicating that, in this newfound state of forgiveness, his future was forever linked with their future. They would be relying on God together.

We arrive at forgiveness by relying on God in the humility of our own sinfulness, by relying on God in the confidence of God's powerful mercy, and—in the best cases—by relying on God together with other people.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the book *UNconditional*, author Brian Zahnd gives many wonderful examples of people who were able to forgive after very difficult circumstances: Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom who watched her sister die in a Nazi concentration camp; Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who was imprisoned in a Soviet labor camp for eight years; Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in hard labor in a rock quarry prison in South Africa; and the Amish of Pennsylvania whose five daughters were killed and five others wounded in a 2006 school shooting; and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified.

At one point in the book, author Zahnd asks,

So what is your story? Who has been cruel to you? . . . What injustice have you suffered? . . . Who has cheated you? Abused you? Mistreated you? Lied to you? Lied *about* you? Maybe it was last week. Maybe it was a lifetime ago. As you remember your suffered injustice, how does it affect the way you view the future? Or let me put it another way [, he writes,] What are you waiting for? . . . An opportunity to exact your revenge? If so, you have no future . . . [and] . . . you will become the very thing you hate . . . Forgiveness is not weakness; [forgiveness] is the power of God to overcome evil.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout all these weeks that I've been preaching about forgiveness, I've given you a lot of steps you could take to move toward that possibility. And, now, today, maybe you're ready to let go of some of those grudges and sorrows that have hung onto you like a ball and chain. In humility, in confidence, and together with your friends in Christ—I invite you to receive and offer forgiveness by relying on God.

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics by Elisha A. Hoffman, 1887.

<sup>2</sup>Charisma House: Lake Mary, FL, 2010, pp. 83f.