

Total Forgiveness, Part 2

You may ask, “How can I know when I have totally forgiven someone?” The Bible gives us a very good example of what that looks like in the person of Joseph.

To refresh your memory: Joseph was the next to youngest of twelve sons of Jacob, also called Israel. He and his younger brother Benjamin were the favorites of Jacob. His older half-brothers were jealous of him because of this obvious favoritism and a dream Joseph had that indicated he would be the superior brother of the clan.

Genesis 37:6 He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamed:
7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” 8 His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.
9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”

This did not set well with the older brothers, and it didn’t help that Jacob made a special coat for Joseph that he wore with considerable pride, much to the chagrin of his older half-brothers. They were so jealous of him that they plotted his murder but ended up selling him into slavery to a passing band of Midianites instead. They told Jacob that he was killed by a wild animal and presented Joseph’s coat splattered with goat's blood as proof.

Genesis 37:33 And he identified it and said, “It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.”
34 Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him. 36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Jacob went into deep mourning over the “loss” of his favorite son. He feared he would die, “go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Sheol then was a place where the dead went and was in the Earth below. It had several compartments. One was Hell, also called “Torments,” which was for the lost, and one was called “Paradise” or “Abraham’s Bosom” which was for the saved. This is seen clearly in Luke 16:19-31 in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Jesus also mentioned Paradise to the penitent thief while hanging on the Cross.

Luke 23:43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

At the time that was spoken, it was before the Cross with the judgment of sins, and Christ had died and risen. After that, the occupants of Paradise were moved to Heaven. Those in Torments remain there awaiting their final judgment.

Joseph was sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar, an Egyptian official, probably the chief jailor in all of Egypt. Potiphar’s wife took a liking to the young Hebrew and tried to get him to bed her, but Joseph refused. She then retaliated and accused him of attempting to rape her, whereby her husband put him in jail. He did no wrong but was punished anyway.

He had much to be bitter about. His brothers had treated him terribly by selling him into slavery. Then Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown in jail. But God was allowing all this to happen. He had plans for Joseph that involved delivering his family through a future seven-year famine. These 12 brothers would become the nucleus of the nation Israel that God was preparing to build, and through the agency of Joseph, God was saving them for future greatness.

After some time in prison, Joseph got two cellmates: Pharaoh’s baker and cupbearer (wine taster). They had dreams they did not understand that Joseph offered to interpret. He predicted the baker would be hung in three days, and the cupbearer would be released and get his job back. And just as predicted, both events happened. As the cupbearer was being freed,

Joseph asked him to “remember him” to Pharaoh, meaning remind Pharaoh of the fact that he was innocent of any wrongdoing.

Genesis 40:14 Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. ¹⁵ For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit.”

But the cupbearer would “forget” Joseph, and the young Hebrew languished in prison for two more years. God was preparing Joseph for greatness, but first, God needed to rid Joseph of his self-pity and self-righteousness, “For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit” (Gen 40:15). First Corinthians 13:5 says that love “keeps no record of wrongs.” Joseph had not yet forgiven his brothers. He also remembered his dream that one day, his brothers would bow down to him, but that was still yet many years away.

When Pharaoh had a dream his people could not interpret, the cupbearer remembered Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams and he was summoned from the prison to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. Joseph interpreted the dream as concerning a period of coming famine for seven years preceded by seven years of a bountiful harvest. Joseph urged Pharaoh to save some grain during the seven bountiful years so they would have grain to see them through the seven-year-long famine that would follow. Pharaoh liked the idea and selected Joseph to be his second-in-command in all of Egypt to oversee the storage of grain during the seven years of plenty and disbursing the stored grain during the famine that followed.

As predicted, the famine came upon the land. Up in Canaan Joseph’s family was experiencing it there also, so Jacob sent some of the sons to buy grain in Egypt. They, of course, had to appeal to Pharaoh’s agent Joseph, but since he dressed as an Egyptian and spoke that language in conversations they had with him, Joseph concealed his identity from them. His brothers did not recognize him.

Benjamin, Joseph's younger full brother, had become Jacob's favorite. Fearing for his favorite surviving son, Jacob had not allowed Benjamin to accompany his brothers to Egypt to buy grain.

Joseph was emotionally moved at the sight of his brothers and demanded that *all* the brothers come before he would sell them the grain. He sent his brothers home with some grain to retrieve Benjamin. But Jacob refused to allow Benjamin to accompany the brothers back to Egypt. But the famine grew worse, and he was forced to send his boys, including Benjamin, back to Egypt to buy grain.

Upon seeing Benjamin, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. Instead of punishing them, which he had the power to do, he wept. And here is where he demonstrated total forgiveness. This is what total forgiveness looks like in the person of Joseph.

Application

Do not let anyone know what someone said about you or did to you.

When he revealed himself, Joseph had everyone but his brothers leave their presence (Gen. 45:1). Only the brothers remained. Why? Because he didn't want anyone in Egypt to know what his brothers had done. There was no need for anyone else to know that.

Joseph was a national hero in Egypt because of his plan to save grain for the famine, and he knew the Egyptians would hate his brothers if they knew they had sold him into slavery. Joseph knew they would never tell, thus the Egyptians could never find out unless he revealed it. That is one proof that he had totally forgiven.

How does God forgive us?

Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Acts 3:19 ...that your sins may be blotted out.

Micah 7:19 He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

It is as though our sins don't exist anymore. They are gone. As far as our eternal security is concerned, they will *never* be held against us. God knows a lot of things about me that you will never know because He will never tell.

So, why do we tell others about how we have been wronged? The reason is most likely because we want to punish our enemy. We want to see them suffer like we did. We want to make them look bad and hurt their credibility or reputation in return for them hurting us. In our hearts, we say, "Serves 'em right!"

Joseph is seen by many as a "type of Christ," meaning he displays the character of Christ in his actions. Despite his imperfections, he is a "type" that points to the future coming of Messiah. The way Joseph forgave his brothers foreshadows how Christ forgives you.

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

We all have sins we wish to hide. It is comforting to know that God will never tell anyone what He knows about us.

Do not allow those who hurt you to be afraid of you or intimidated by you. Joseph revealed himself to his brothers with tears and compassion. The last thing he wanted was for them to fear him or that he might retaliate for what they did.

When we have *not* totally forgiven those who hurt us, it gives us a bit of pleasure to realize they are afraid or intimidated. But that only shows that there is still bitterness in *our* hearts.

1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

If people are afraid of us, and that is what we want, we are not walking in forgiveness. But that was not Joseph. He said to his brothers, "Come near

to me, please.” (Gen. 45:4) Why did he do this? Because he didn’t want them to be afraid. His forgiveness was demonstrated by the way he wept so loudly for his brothers that the Egyptians outside the room heard it.

Our insecurity is what causes us to want people to stand in awe of us. We become pretentious and try to keep others from knowing what we are really like. Jesus was the most unpretentious person you could ever meet.

Even after revealing himself, Joseph could have kept his brothers at a distance and demanded they praise him for his great position and achievements. He could have demanded they fall down on their knees before him. He could have reminded them of *that* dream. He could have said, “I told you so.” But he didn’t. He said, “Come near to me, please.” And he wept loudly.

What Joseph wanted his brothers to feel is what Jesus wants us to feel about Himself and the Father, to feel at ease in His presence. When He met with the eleven disciples in the upper room after His resurrection, there was no hint of rebuke for their desertion and betrayal before His crucifixion. He simply picked up where He left off before the whole ordeal began and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.” (John 20:21)

1 John 14:18 There is no fear in love...

Joseph did not want his brothers to be afraid, and when we have totally forgiven our offenders, we will not want them to be afraid either.

We will want them to forgive themselves and not feel guilty. Knowing exactly what his brothers were thinking, Joseph said, “And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here.” (Gen 45:5) Joseph did not want his brothers to feel guilt for what they had done. Sometimes we say, “I forgive you for what you did, but I hope you feel bad about it.” This shows we still wish to see them punished. Joseph wanted to set his brothers free of fear.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Joseph understood this principle stated by Paul many centuries later. He told his brothers:

Genesis 45:5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

He effectively told them it was God who decreed that he should be sent to Egypt to prepare to deliver them from the famine.

“For those who love God, all things work together for good.” Even in our darkest hours, God is present and working to turn “all things” into something ultimately positive for those of us who are suffering. Joseph understood this principle, and since God was in it, he could hold no grudge against his brothers and attempted to reassure them of that.

Total forgiveness is *not* wanting our offenders to feel guilty or upset with themselves for what they did. There is a divine purpose in God letting it happen.

We will let them save face. Allowing our offenders to save face is taking total forgiveness a step further.

Genesis 45:7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Saving face is the act of preserving one’s dignity and self-esteem. Not only is it a refusal to let a person feel guilty, it provides a rationale that enables what they did to look good rather than bad. God lets us save face by causing our past to work out for our good.

Joseph told his brothers, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:8). Imagine for a moment, how this statement affected his brothers. Surely, it was met with doubt, followed by an unimaginable

burden being lifted from their shoulders. How could this be? According to Joseph, the answer was simple: God had predestined that Abraham's descendants would live in Egypt, and He had sent Joseph ahead of the family to prepare the way. God knew about the famine and made arrangements to preserve the 12 brothers who would be the nucleus of the nation Israel He planned to create as His own.

Joseph was also admitting that had he been in their situation, he would have done what they did. He had become self-aware of what he was capable of.

Two reasons we are able to forgive are:

- We see what we have been forgiven for.
- We see what we are capable of.

When we are all indignant over what someone has done to us, there is a real possibility that we are either self-righteous or have no self-awareness or both. When we see ourselves for what we truly are and recognize that *we are capable of committing any sin* as anyone else, only then can we truly forgive.

When we let people save face, we are not merely being magnanimous and gracious, we are doing what is right and just.

We will protect those who hurt us from their greatest fear. When Joseph revealed his identity and expressed his forgiveness, the brothers likely experienced two feelings at the same time. First, they must have felt relief, but that was quickly followed by their greatest fear of all: they would have to return to Canaan and tell their father the truth about what they had done. For years, their worst nightmare was that their father would find out about their deception.

But Joseph was way ahead of them and anticipated their dread. He knew that his forgiveness was worthless if they had to tell the whole story to Jacob. Joseph told his brothers to tell the truth—that Joseph was alive and well in Egypt and Prime Minister to Pharaoh. He told them exactly *what* to say and only as much as Jacob needed to know.

Genesis 45:9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. ¹⁰ You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’ ¹² And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.”

Was this deceptive? Sin that is under the blood of our Sovereign Redeemer does not need to be confessed to anyone but God. If you feel you must share your situation with another person for some therapeutic reason, you must choose that person wisely. You should not involve an innocent person by unloading on them information that they do not need to know. Instead, confess your sin to God.

Psalms 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Would telling Jacob all the sordid details have been better? But wouldn’t that have been an even greater problem for Jacob, having to struggle with knowing what his sons had done, dealing with the bitterness, and regretting all the lost years he could have had with Joseph?

No, Joseph was wise and fair, and that caused his brothers to respect him all the more.

For just a moment, consider all the secret things in your life that you have confessed and been forgiven for. Are you not grateful that your Father in Heaven will never reveal to anyone else how utterly stupid you have been? That is total forgiveness, and total forgiveness is what Joseph expressed to his brothers. Did they deserve it? Of course not, but then that was a grace gesture on the part of Joseph.

Total forgiveness is a lifelong commitment. It isn't enough to forgive someone today and return to the offense tomorrow. Total forgiveness is a lifelong commitment that you will need to practice every single day until you die.

Seventeen years after the reunion with his long-lost son, Jacob died, and Joseph's brothers panicked.

Genesis 50:15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."

Because of their fear, they created a story to tell Joseph.

Genesis 50:16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him

This was obviously a lie. Had Jacob really said this, he would have said it directly to Joseph. Furthermore, it was an obvious lie because Joseph had never been told what the brothers had done.

When Joseph heard this, he wept. He could not believe that his brothers doubted him. Despite his assurances, all this time they had lived in fear that Joseph would eventually take vengeance on them.

Genesis 50:19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph's forgiveness seventeen years before was not just some passing fancy. It was not an empty gesture. He meant it and stood by what he had said back then. "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for

good” (Gen. 50:20), and “he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen. 50:21).

Seventeen years after the first meetings Joseph was *still* forgiving of his brothers and harbored no thoughts of vengeance. He was prepared to care for his brothers indefinitely. It isn’t total forgiveness unless it lasts forever. No matter how great the temptation to turn back, total forgiveness must go on and on, and some days may be harder than others.

You must never tell what you know and make your offender feel fear, feel guilt, or lose face, and you must never reveal their most devastating secrets.

We will pray for them to be blessed. Total forgiveness means praying for God’s blessings to rain down on those who have hurt you.

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Do this, and *you* are being set free. To pray for the one who hurt you means that they will be blessed, and God will shower down favor on them rather than punish them. In other words, pray that God deals with them as you would want Him to deal with you. Sounds like the Golden Rule? Sounds like it because it is ...

Matthew 7:12 “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them ...”

You don’t pray for vengeance or for God to discipline them. You don’t pray, “Lord, I commend them to you.” You must pray that they receive total forgiveness—the same as you want for yourself.

Job’s suffering did not end until he prayed for his so-called “friends” who judged and criticized him.

Job 42:10 And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

This is what Christ-likeness looks like. Total forgiveness is the very lifestyle of Christ lived in the flesh right here and right now, as expressed by Paul in Galatians.

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Understand that this “fruit” is generated by the Spirit. It is the “fruit of the Spirit.” You don’t muster it up by your own power. It is generated in you by the Holy Spirit when you are “walking in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16) in fellowship with God.

A perfect example of this is Stephen. As they were stoning him to death, what did he pray?

Acts 7:60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

The same plea as from Jesus on the Cross. Total forgiveness totally forgives even the most egregious wrongs, it does not remember them, and it prays for the blessing of those who wronged you.

How do you know you have totally forgiven?

How do you know you have forgiven that jerk who told lies about you, betrayed your deepest and most painful secrets, was unfaithful in marriage, that unkind parent, that unfair teacher, or the person who hurt your child, in other words, “totally ruined your life?”

You know you have totally forgiven when you can say you have worked through these seven principles:

1. We do not let anyone know what someone said about us or did to us.
2. We do not allow someone who wronged us to be afraid of us or be intimidated by us.
3. We want them to forgive themselves and not feel guilty.

4. We let them save face.
5. We protect them from their greatest fear.
6. We understand that it is a lifelong commitment.
7. We pray for them to be blessed.

Total forgiveness isn't easy, and it isn't simply saying, "I forgive you." It goes much deeper than that and must last forever, or it isn't total forgiveness.

R.T. Kendall offers one last caution here. He says:

"Never go to a person you have to forgive and say, 'I forgive you.' This will be counterproductive every time unless it is a person you know who is yearning for you to forgive them. Otherwise, you will create a stir with which you will not be able to cope. They will say to you, 'For what?' It is my experience that nine out of ten people I have had to forgive do not feel they have done anything wrong."

It is up to you to forgive them—and keep quiet about it.