

Genesis 50:15-21

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] This morning we were considering the call to forgive directed by Jesus to His disciples. And the gospel logic of the parable that Jesus taught is very clear. We have been generously forgiven, and so we must in turn generously forgive. Indeed, in the absence of experiencing and appreciating God's forgiveness, then it becomes well nigh impossible for us to forgive as we ought. However, as those who have been forgiven and who recognize and who have experienced God's forgiveness, His canceling of a debt that was unpayable, the sins that we have committed against God, we could never cancel that debt ourselves, but He has done it for us. And as we experience that rich and generous forgiveness, so the onus, the call, the reasonable expectation and demand of God is that we would in turn forgive others. And in this gospel logic, if we want to call it that, there's an echo of a principle that lies at the heart of God's covenant with His people going right back into the Old Testament to God's covenant with Abraham. Remember, Abraham in the covenant was promised that he would be blessed, but together with that, coupled with that, was the promise and indeed the call that he and his descendants would be of blessing to others. The same, if you wish, or similar gospel logic, blessed in order that we might be of blessing to others, forgiven that we might in turn forgive others. Well, I want to turn to the Old Testament this evening and to continue giving some thought to this gospel demand. To forgive, reminding ourselves of what

Jesus said this morning, or what we noticed that Jesus said this morning, to forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times, or seventy times as seven times. Now, forgiveness, as presented in the Bible, has a number of elements. And these necessary elements, certainly some of them, are found in the story of forgiveness recorded for us in Genesis concerning Joseph and his brothers. As we think of this story, we shouldn't think of it as a model of forgiveness because it is an account, a true account of one particular family drama. And it's recorded for us accurately, but there's no indication, there's no reason for us to take this as being the perfect example of how forgiveness is to be sought and to be granted and to be received. That's not the intention. So, it's not a model in that sense, but it certainly is an example, and it's an example that we can draw from and learn from. So, we want to think of some of the elements that are involved, necessary elements in this matter of forgiveness. And in the outline there that you have, you can see the ones that I've suggested. There's, of course, the sin that is committed. It may seem a bit unnecessary to make that point, but clearly, in the absence of sin, there is no need for forgiveness. What about in the story that we want to think about this evening, Joseph and his brothers? What about the sin committed? We're not going to dwell on that. I think we're familiar with what Joseph's brothers had done. It's recorded for us in Genesis chapter 37. Perhaps the most eloquent description of the sin committed by the brothers against Joseph can be found in the words of the brothers themselves in chapter 42 of Genesis in verses 21-22. This is, of course, when years had passed, and the brothers, because of the famine, find themselves in Egypt seeking the supplies that they need to survive. And they meet with their brother, though, of course, at this point, they don't realize that it is their brother. And there, in that context, they themselves acknowledge what they had done, and they do so very powerfully. Genesis chapter 42 and verses 21 and 22, they said to one another, the brothers there, surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen. That's why this distress has come upon us. Reuben replied, one of the brothers, didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy, but you wouldn't listen. Now we must give an accounting for his blood. And it's very vivid, the picture they paint of Joseph pleading for mercy. Joseph in great distress as his own brothers are selling him into slavery. And what they would have imagined that he would have anticipated was death and suffering in great measure. And they ignored his pleas for mercy, his own flesh and blood, his own brothers treating Joseph in such an appalling way. This is the sin that they were guilty of, and they know it. And the years have passed, and yet now they're reminded it's brought back so vividly to them. And they imagine that this is some kind of karma. We caused him so much distress. Now distress is coming upon us. Well, as I say, we don't want to spend time or

too much time talking about the sin that they committed. But one thing I would say as we try and draw out lessons for ourselves, I would say that this does remind us the sin of Joseph's brothers committed against their own brother, against Joseph. It reminds us of the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness within our own families. I'm sure none of us are under the illusion that somehow within our families we live in some kind of sinless bubble where we never hurt one another and we never harm one another and we never grieve or injure one another. Within our families there is sin, and there is sin that harms and damages and hurts others. We sin against those we are closest to, and often those we love most. We are unfaithful. We are unkind. We speak harshly. We demean and humiliate. We lie. We do all of these things to those who are closest to us, to our own family members. I wonder for how many of us sin and a subsequent failure to forgive continues to blight family relationships. It's difficult to imagine that the original offense, whatever it might be in my experience or in your experience, difficult to imagine that the original offense was in the same league as a sin committed by Joseph's brothers, selling Joseph into slavery. And yet, the feud that began, the resentment that was first sown by that harsh word, by that lie that we told, or whatever it was, the feud, the resentment continues through the years and the decades. And Christian families are not immune from that. Churches can be divided because of family members that don't speak to one another. Families can know much pain and hurt over many years because of sin that is not acknowledged and that is not forgiven. Well, the sin committed. But then, as we move on in the story of Joseph and his brothers,

I want to see the next stage, if we want to call it that, and that is the presence of a forgiving spirit or disposition on the part of Joseph. And let's read a few verses just to witness that.

[8 : 46] And we're going to read from chapter 45. So, chapter 45 of Genesis and verses 1 through to 15. We'd already made mention of the brothers speaking among themselves as they come to the conclusion that the distress that they're suffering is because of what they had done to their brother. At that point, they still don't realize that the one who has risen to such prominence in Egypt is Joseph. But now, in chapter 45, Joseph makes himself known. And in doing so, we're able to detect very clearly on the part of Joseph a forgiving spirit, a willingness, a disposition to forgive his brothers. Let's just read the account. Beginning of chapter 45. Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, make everyone leave my presence. So, there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, I am Joseph. Is my father still living? But his brothers were not able to answer him because they were terrified at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, come close to me. When they had done so, he said, I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now, there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years, there will not be plowing and reaping.

But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, Lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now, hurry back to my father and say to him, this is what your son Joseph says. God has made me Lord of all Egypt. Come down to me. Don't delay.

You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me, you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise, you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.

You can see for yourselves. And so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen, and bring my father down here quickly. Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept.

[11 : 32] And Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards, his brothers talked with him. Now, the idea isn't to draw out any of the details of that account, but what it certainly reveals, I think without any doubt, is that in Joseph there is this genuine disposition to forgive his brothers for the great sin that they had committed against him.

We might even suggest or imagine that in his own mind, in his own heart, his brothers already enjoyed his forgiveness. And yet, forgiveness is not requested by his brothers. They're in shock, and they don't take the opportunity on this occasion. And as it's not requested, nor is it explicitly granted. Both sides acknowledge that a great sin was committed, and yet there is not this requesting of nor granting of forgiveness. And I think this is a problem, and it becomes a problem. Maybe at the time it didn't seem a problem to Joseph, but it becomes a problem. As the story develops, we see how it leads to insecurity and doubt in the minds of Joseph's brothers. We see that in the passage we read at the end of the account in chapter 50. When the time comes and their father dies, they begin to have doubts about Joseph's intentions and Joseph's affection for them, the genuineness of his forgiveness or his apparent forgiveness. And they begin to ask among themselves, has he really forgiven us? Perhaps he has only treated us so well over these years out of loyalty to his father, our father. Perhaps he still holds a grudge towards us. That's exactly what they say there in verse 15 of chapter 50. What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs that we did to him? Why is there this doubt? Well, some of the reasons are given.

They wonder whether Joseph's attitude was to do with their father. And now that their father has gone, well, it will be a different story. But I wonder if part of the reason, a very important part of the reason for the doubt that comes flooding into the minds and the hearts of the brothers is that there had never been that moment when forgiveness was sought and forgiveness was granted. And so they doubt whether there is indeed in Joseph genuine forgiveness towards them. Now, in the case of Joseph, it's clear that their fears that their fears were unfounded. But it is the case that we can often give the impression of having forgiven, where genuine forgiveness is in fact absent in our own relationships, in our own circumstances. And we must not assume that somebody has forgiven us, nor should we assume that others know that we have forgiven them. So often, to avoid awkward moments, or potential embarrassment or conflict, we assume way too much. Oh, I'm sure he knows that I've forgiven him. I'm sure she knows that I hold no grudge. There's no need for me to ask for him to forgive me.

It's understood. And we avoid that face-to-face encounter. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, we see how in time that led to doubt and insecurity, especially for his brothers. We should never assume on forgiveness. The offender, if it's you, then you must consciously and explicitly ask for forgiveness.

And the one who has been offended must clearly and unequivocally grant that forgiveness to the one who asks for it. This had still not happened in chapter 15, when Joseph makes himself known to his brothers. If it had, perhaps the brothers would have been spared a lot of grief and anxiety.

[16 : 10] Well, let's move on in the story to the passage right at the end of Genesis, where we have these two crucial elements, the request for forgiveness and the granting of forgiveness on the part of Joseph.

First of all, the request for forgiveness. In verses 15 to 18, we find this request relayed to Joseph.

Now, the request itself has its own peculiar, you might even say, suspicious features. Well, to begin with, the brothers deal with Joseph through a third party. Somebody is sent, a servant, we don't know, we're not told, but somebody is sent to convey to Joseph this request for forgiveness. I think there they started on the wrong foot. In the matter of seeking forgiveness, in the matter of granting forgiveness, what is necessary is a face-to-face encounter.

Now, there may be circumstances where that's impossible, and if that's the case, well, we acknowledge that such circumstances can be present. But where it is possible, surely better to approach the one we have offended and face-to-face seek their forgiveness that they might also, we trust, grant it to us.

The other peculiar feature, we might even call it a suspicious feature, is this message from Jacob, conveniently delivered just before he died. Now, we can take it at face value and say, well, this indeed was a message that Jacob had given to his sons to relay to Joseph, and that may well be so. It does seem, though, very convenient and just a little bit suspicious that this message was conveyed at a time when there would have been no way to confirm, indeed, whether the message was given or the content of it. But let's not be so suspicious and take it at face value. What we certainly have here is a request for forgiveness, and there are a number of features in this request on the part of the brothers that they would be forgiven. The first thing that's so evident, perhaps what stands out, is that there is a recognition of the gravity of the sin committed. The father who gave the message, and clearly the sons share the father's sentiments, emphasize the great wrong that had been done. And there in verse 16, your father left these instructions before he died. This is what you are to say to Joseph. I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. They clearly acknowledged that what they did was wrong. It was wicked. It was evil. It was a grave offense that they had committed against their brother. If we are to seek forgiveness from another, indeed, if we are to seek forgiveness from God, but certainly as we seek forgiveness from one another, it is always necessary for us to acknowledge our sin and, indeed, the gravity of it. Minimizing our sin, minimizing our fault will seldom result in genuine forgiveness being sought or granted, be that from God or from one another. How often in our own relationships, maybe as husband and wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, brothers, sisters, parents, whatever they are, we're very quick to minimize the offense. And so, wow, there's no need to deal with that, to talk about that. It was such a trivial thing. Whether we actually think it was trivial or whether we convince ourselves it was trivial, and yet, for all we know, the one hurt.

[20 : 10] It takes a very different view, but it's also remaining silent, and that it is under the surface. And at any point, it comes up and bites us, because we minimize the gravity of what we have done.

Here, the brothers recognized that they had committed a grave sin, a crucial element in seeking forgiveness. There's also in this request something that there had not been before, that they had already acknowledged that what they had done was a grave sin. We've read how they describe themselves, the occasion. They're already aware of that. They had been aware of that already.

But here in the request, there's a new element. There is the hope that forgiveness will be granted. We don't know just to what extent they were confident that Joseph would grant them forgiveness.

There must have been some element of doubt, even in the way this situation is introduced. Perhaps Joseph holds a grudge. Of course, if he did hold a grudge, then, well, would he be willing to forgive? But there is the hope that forgiveness will be granted. And no doubt that hope was grounded on the forgiving disposition that Joseph had already demonstrated in so many ways to his brothers.

When they first came under conviction of sin and guilt, that conviction was unrelieved by any prospect or hope of forgiveness. But now things have changed. I wonder in our own relationships, do we give others the confidence that we are of a forgiving spirit and disposition? Or does our behavior and do our attitudes rather push people away so that they wouldn't even dare to approach us to ask to be forgiven because they have no confidence that that forgiveness would be granted? But another element in this request for forgiveness is that it is grounded. They give their father and they adopt the father's argumentation, if you wish. They have no doubt. They have no doubt. They have no doubt. They have no doubt.

[22 : 25] Notice in verse 17, in the second half of the verse, I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.

The ground of their request is in their shared bonds of family and faith. They share a common father.

The father is the one, we're told, who passes this message to Joseph. The brothers adopt it as their own, and they're grounding their request on this family tie that unites them, but also that they are united by the God of their father. The God of their father also unites them and gives them grounds to seek forgiveness forgiveness. We as believers are to be forgiving to all who seek forgiveness, but there is a particular onus placed upon us towards the family of faith of which we form a part. But then finally, let's notice the granting of forgiveness. In verses 19 to 21, we have that part of the story recorded for us. And what can we say about and learn from Joseph and the manner in which he grants forgiveness to his brothers?

I'm suggesting that there's three features to it. The first is that his forgiveness that he grants to his brothers is rooted in love. Now, we see this in many ways, but if we limit ourselves to what is recorded there in these verses in the final chapter, in chapter 50. First of all, we notice that when Joseph first receives the request for forgiveness through this servant or third party, he weeps.

We read that there in verse 17, when their message came to him, this message requesting forgiveness. When the message came to him, Joseph wept. And we are sure that these tears were tears that were evidence of the deep love that he had, that he bore towards his brothers, even though they had done him such a great evil deed. It's rooted in love. But then also, as Joseph begins to address his brothers and speak to them and effectively grant the forgiveness that they have sought, he begins and he ends the words that he has to say, urging them not to fear. Don't be afraid. We read that in verse 19. And then again in verse 21, so then, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. His concern is for their comfort and security.

[25 : 29] He loves them dearly and deeply and wishes the best for them. Forgiveness is a duty placed upon us by God, very particularly as those who have been forgiven by God. But it is a duty to be performed in love.

Rooted in love, but another feature of Joseph's forgiveness is that it is underpinned by faith. And here I'm speaking of faith in God and in God's overruling purposes. In verses 19 and 20, Joseph reassures his brothers as to why he is so ready and willing to forgive, namely, that he can see the gracious hand of God even in their wickedness. Now, these are words that are very familiar. So often this passage is referred to quite properly and helpfully as evidence of God's gracious and sovereign overruling of affairs, even of wickedness to secure good. And quite rightly, we turn to this passage as revealing in a very vivid way how God can use the deeds of wicked men to bring about good, bring about salvation, the saving of many lives. We see that, of course, most wonderfully and dramatically. Calvary, the wickedness of men being used by God to secure salvation. And here too, and rightly, we turn to this and draw comfort in terms of God's power and sovereign authority that we can know that and we can know the security of that in the face of evil and wickedness and those things that we are guilty of and others are guilty of that affect us in one way or another. But what I am drawing from this is how that conviction on the part of Joseph helps him to forgive. You see, even though he had suffered so terribly at the hands of his brothers, he's able to see that God was overruling and bringing out good from it, and that helps him to forgive.

It's not the only element, but it's there. The resentment that there might have been, the desire for revenge that might have been present is in some measure dissipated or is dissipated by different things, but by this also, that he can see how God has worked through the circumstances, even through the evil of his brothers. And so this passage serves as an encouragement to us to forgive, that when we are wrong and we're hurt and we're harmed in one way or another, to have that conviction of the bigger picture that even though that was a real harm and a real hurt, to be assured that even in that, God is working for our good, that all things are being ordered by God for our good. And so we can forgive in the assurance that even the most grievous offense suffered has been so ordered by God as to result in our own good. The reformer John Calvin famously commented on this passage with an expression that has subsequently been hijacked or owned by others, and you see it written by others, whether they're aware of the original source or not, I'm not sure. But Calvin says this about this occasion or about the manner in which

God so ordered the evil of Joseph's brothers to result in good. He says this, so that whatever poison Satan produces, Satan produces, God turns it into medicine for his elect. Whatever offense or injury or attack you endure, however painful, can be borne and the offender forgiven in the assurance that God has or will, in an act of sovereign alchemy, transform the poison into medicine. The granting of forgiveness is rooted in love. It's underpinned by faith, but it's finally characterized by generosity. Notice how the account ends in verse 21. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. And Joseph reassured them and spoke kindly to them, or what is literally said there, spoke to their heart. He does much more than forgive them. He promises to provide for them and to provide for their children, to be generous with them. He comforts them. He reassures them. He speaks kindly to them. This is going the extra mile.

This is way beyond mere forgiveness, if we can speak of forgiveness ever, as being mere forgiveness. His forgiveness is characterized by extravagant generosity.

[30 : 42] But let me just finish with one final observation. Joseph, in the words that he directs to his brothers, quite correctly acknowledges that he does not stand in the place of God. Notice what he says there in verse 19.

Joseph said to them, don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? Quite rightly, he says, no, I don't stand in the place of God. And yet, in his actions and in his forgiveness, Joseph is very God-like. He is loving, he is generous, and he is extravagant. May we, as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, as those who have been generously forgiven, may we always be characterized by a forgiving spirit and by forgiveness that is God-like, loving, loving, generous, and extravagant. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for the manner in which it relates for us, accounts of real-life family dramas, as we think of the one that we've been considering this evening. And it's horrifying to imagine how brothers could have sold their own brother into slavery. And yet, that is what happened. And yet, we thank you how even that great evil deed was so ordered and used and directed by God, by you, to bring about the saving of many lives. We thank you that you are a God whose power is of that magnitude, that you never find yourself frustrated, even by our foolishness and by our wickedness. You order these things for the good of your people and for the fulfilling of your purposes. We pray that our conviction concerning this reality would also be an encouragement to us when we are hurt, when we are grieved, when we are offended by others, to see the big picture, and that that would help us, accompanied by a love that you place in our hearts that would help us to forgive those who come seeking forgiveness. Pray that we would also be quick when we are those who offend, to seek the forgiveness of those we have offended. Help us in these matters and bless us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.