

## INTRODUCTION

My wife and I have different personalities. She is an easy-come-easy-go kind of person. Her parents were originally from Hunan province. Perhaps she eats too much chili pepper since childhood sometimes she can get irritated easily. But when things are clarified or someone offers her an apology her temper quickly subsides. As for me, I consider myself a gentle person. I may not be ticked off easily but it also takes longer for me to recover from unhappy emotion. Psalm 103 says that our God “will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.” My wife can easily accuse and I sometimes harbor my anger for too long. The conclusion is that it is not a good thing to provoke the Choi couple. Regardless, forgiveness is always the best solution when we are offended. Even doctors tell us that it does our body no good to hold resentment in our hearts. We know that God tells us to forgive those who hurt us. It is easier to say than do. How can we practice forgiveness? There is a classic example of forgiveness in the book of Genesis. The main character Joseph had a dramatic life. His life stories are recorded in Genesis chapters 37 to 50. Joseph had 10 older brothers born from different mothers. Jacob, the father, showed favoritism to Joseph because he came from a favorite wife at a later stage in life. Jacob made a multi-colored robe just for Joseph. That further upset the older brothers. Worse still, Joseph often reported their wrong-doings to the father. Finally, they came up with a wicked plan to sell Joseph to some merchants, who subsequently took him to Egypt. They lied to their father that Joseph was devoured by a wild animal. They thought their eye-sore would be gone forever. But long story short, out God’s Providence, Joseph was elevated to become the governor of Egypt. Because of a famine, the brothers went to Egypt to buy food. They met Joseph again. Of course, they did not recognize him. Joseph chose to reconcile with his brothers. Later, Pharaoh gave permission to allow the household of Jacob to immigrate to Egypt. Seventeen years had passed. We are told at the end of chapter 49 that Jacob died. Joseph then led the family to go back to Canaan to bury their deceased father. We pick up the story in 50:15 after they had returned to Egypt. The brothers wondered if Joseph had indeed forgiven them. From Joseph we shall learn that we can forgive if we believe that God has a purpose in the offense we went through.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 被罪咎所壓 Overwhelmed by Guilt

The brothers of Joseph were overwhelmed by guilt because they sinned against him. Let us read [verse 15](#) again: When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” They wondered if Joseph forgave them only because he was showing favor to their father. If so, then Joseph would surely pay them back after their father was gone. Harboring hatred is a dreadful thing. The Chinese have a saying: “Ten years is never too late for a noble person to retaliate.” To some people sooner or later retaliation is a must! Back then their father Jacob stole the birth-right from his twin brother, Esau. Remember that red bean soup episode? Jacob later fled for his life. Esau was so mad that he planned a revenge. [Genesis 27:41](#) reads: Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, “The days of

mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” Unrestrained anger will lead to revenge. The mentality is “you hurt me and I will hurt you more.” Now the brothers were afraid that Joseph wanted to make even. The Bible tells us that Jacob and the rest of the family were living in Goshen. Joseph, being the governor, might spend most of his time in the Egyptian palace. He might not see his brothers that often. With Jacob’s passing on all the brothers met again for the funeral. The thought of facing Joseph triggered their fear. In **verses 16-17** the brothers sent a messenger to Joseph, saying: 16 ... “Your father left these instructions before he died” 17 ‘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.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” ... The brothers were smart enough to phrase it “your” father instead of “our” father. Joseph must honor his father’s death wish. Did Jacob really say so before he died? There is no record in the previous chapters to indicate that Jacob knew what evil the older brothers had done to Joseph. If this request was so important then why didn’t Jacob tell Joseph directly when he was still alive? Regardless, the brothers used three different phrases in verse 17 to describe their offense to Joseph – sins, wrongs and treating you so badly. Whether the brothers were quoting their father’s own words or not, they admitted what they did was evil. Taking full responsibility is the first step in seeking forgiveness. One cannot trivialize the wrongdoing by making an excuse like: “Oh, it was a mistake and I didn’t mean it.” The brothers had intended to kill Joseph. Though they ended up selling him as a slave the whole plot was wicked. They regretted for what they did. They were overwhelmed by their guilt. After the brothers sent a messenger to check on Joseph’s response they came to see him in-person. **Verse 18** records: His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said. The message is simple: as long as you can spare our lives just treat us however you see fit. The prodigal son in Jesus’ parable had a similar attitude. When the wayward child determined to go home he figured that he did not deserve to be a son again. He would rather be a servant of his father just to survive. The brothers wondered if Joseph’s forgiveness was genuine. They were in constant fear of Joseph’s revenge. When there is fear, there is no love and no peace. **1 John 4:18** tells us: There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. The brothers could not feel Joseph’s love and acceptance toward them.

Only true forgiveness can take away one’s guilt. In his book “Rumors of Another World” Philip Yancey illustrates this truth with a story. When Nelson Mandela became the president of South Africa, he appointed a commission to bring to trial those who were guilty of atrocities during the time of racial conflict. Any police officer who voluntarily faced his accusers and confessed his crime would be pardoned. One day, an elderly black woman was brought into a court to see the officer who had brutally murdered her husband and their only son. The judge asked what she wanted from him. She said, “Although I have no family, I still have a lot of love to give.” She requested that the criminal visit her regularly so that she could treat him like a son. Then she said, “I would like to give him a hug to show God has forgiven him and so have I.” As the lady made her way to the witness stand, the officer became so overwhelmed by guilt that he fainted. Love dissolves hatred and forgiveness prevails over one’s guilt. Have you wronged someone in the past? If so, have you begged that person for forgiveness? Don’t justify your wrongdoing. Instead, ask God to give you courage and humility to go to that person and admit your fault. No email or electronic message can fully show your sincerity. A simple “I am sorry” is not enough. Instead, say something like: “I realize what I have done to you is wrong. I am truly sorry for the

hurt that I caused to you. Would you forgive me?” By showing remorse does not necessarily mean that the person you offended will forgive you instantly. But by doing your part, you clear your conscience before God. If that person chooses not to forgive you, then let God work in his/her heart. Often, even if the other party is willing to forgive, you may still be overwhelmed by the guilt. You just would not let go of yourself. If that is the case you need to ask God for His peace. He will lift your guilt away and give you full assurance that your sin has been forgiven. There is no digging up of dead bones or punishment for a past offense. God wants you to know that He is a merciful Father, not a stern judge.

## 2. 受恩典所勝 Overcome by Grace

While the brothers were overwhelmed by their guilt Joseph was overcome by God's grace. Joseph was greatly troubled after he heard the brothers' plea for forgiveness. The second half of **verse 17** reads: ... When their message came to him, Joseph wept. He was heart-broken because his brothers did not know that he had completely forgiven them already. By this time the brothers had been living in Egypt for 17 years. If Joseph had wanted to take revenge he would have done so long time ago. Joseph then reassured his forgiveness to the brothers. He said in **verse 19**: ... “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?” He gave up his right to pay back. Instead, he let God be the judge. That is why Joseph could let go of all the grievance. On the contrary, he comforted his fearful brothers in verses 19 and 21 with the same message: “Don't be afraid.” Joseph had no intention to harm them. How could Joseph's heart be overcome by grace? Now we come to the most important statement in this passage. **Verse 20**: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Joseph pointed out evil as something evil. He did not shrug his shoulders and said: “Nah, no big deal. Don't worry about it.” It was a serious offense. The betrayal by his own brothers when he was 17, the agony of separating from his family and the loss of dignity by being treated as a slave – all those hurtful feelings were still vivid in Joseph's mind. However, despite all that painful experience it also revealed the other half of the truth: “but God intended it for good.” Joseph could have chosen to stay in the dungeon of self-pity for the rest of his life. Instead, he determined to reconcile with his brothers. He could be freed from all the bitterness only when he evaluated his circumstances from God's point of view. No one in his sound mind would volunteer to go through all those awful events. But Joseph trusted the Lord for His plan. He understood that if his brothers had not sold him, he would not have ended up in Egypt. Because of the divine hand of God, he became the governor of Egypt. If he had not become a high official then the household of Jacob would have been wiped out in the famine. When Joseph looked back he could see how God orchestrated all those incidents to fulfill His plan. I am sure that **Romans 8:28** is an all-time favorite verse for many Christians - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. No one would say that suffering is a good thing. But our sovereign God meticulously puts together good and bad things to accomplish His perfect will for us. It does not mean that God initiates sins. God is holy and righteous and there is no sin in Him. But God can turn something negative into positive. We may not see any good coming out from bad things. But we do not let doubts shaken our faith that God is always good. When we choose to forgive we trust that God has not finished our life story yet. In the end Joseph reiterated his forgiveness. He did not say to his brothers: “Alright, guys I forgive you. But I don't want to see you again.” He did not send them away to build pyramids either. Rather, Joseph affirmed his commitment to take care of them and their

families. He said in **verse 21**: “So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. He would continue to treat them as family members. Joseph was overcome by God's grace, and he extended the same grace to his brother.

When we forgive others broken relationship can be rebuilt. There was an interesting story behind Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece “The Last Supper.” When da Vinci was composing his work, he had a heated argument with another painter. Da Vinci was so mad that he came up with an ingenious way to pay revenge. When he was about to paint the appearance of Judas, he used the face of his enemy. Da Vinci was hoping that from then on, that man became the person who betrayed Jesus. Da Vinci felt great in doing that. As he worked on the faces of the other disciples he often tried to draw the face of Jesus. But he was not satisfied with how it looked no matter how hard he tried. Da Vinci felt frustrated. He finally realized what went wrong. His unresolved conflict with the other painter was holding him back from finishing the face of Jesus. Therefore, he decided to reconcile with that person. Only after making peace and repainting the face of Judas was he able to finish the face of Jesus and complete his masterpiece. Reluctance to forgive affects our relationship with others and even with God. Joseph's story has a beautiful ending. However, it may not turn out the same in your situation. Even when you choose to forgive the person who offended you may not own up to the act. You cannot control the outcome; all you can control is your decision. Forgiveness is genuine when it is unconditional. You forgive before the person apologizes, or even if the wrongdoing is denied. That brings up another important point. Forgiveness does not necessarily result in reconciliation. Forgiveness is a one-sided action, but reconciliation needs the effort from both parties. There are times when the pain is so unforgettable that you may not want to see the offender again, or perhaps that person has moved to a different place or had passed away. You can pray to God and forgive the person from your heart. You ask the Lord to fill you with His grace so as to remove any bitterness and hatred. The bad memories may come back to haunt you. Satan may stir up all the negative emotion inside you. What you need to do is to come back to God, because His grace is always sufficient.

## CONCLUSION

We can forgive if we believe that God has a purpose in the offense we went through. Forgiveness is never easy because it is contrary to our human nature. We think that it is fair to retaliate. Some people become indifferent as if the offense never happened. Their hearts turn cold and numb. However, from the story of Joseph we learn that there is a third and best option. God wants us to choose forgiveness. Some of you may protest: “You have no idea how badly this person had hurt me. How can I let him go that easily?” Forgiveness does not only set the offenders free from their guilt, it also sets you free from the torture of agony and shame. It is enough to endure the painful experience. Why dwell in the same suffering for the rest of your life? Jesus may be speaking to your heart over and again: “This one is on me. You have been carrying the burden for so long. Let me take it off from your shoulder.” You see, when Jesus died on the cross He has forgiven our sins – past, present and future. It also includes the sin of our unforgiveness. Therefore, the question is not whether we can forgive others. We are not able to do that on our own. The question is whether we are willing to lean on the Lord and ask Him to give us the strength to forgive. We are sinners by birth and we all need the forgiving grace of our Lord. But are we willing to pass on the same grace to others who also need it badly? To forgive is not our human nature. We must need a supernatural force to help us do that.