



Genesis 50:15-21 - ¹⁵ 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?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "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." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

God's forgiveness empowers us

-To overcome doubt

-To forgive others



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!
(1 John 3:1)*

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” The fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer shows us a two way street. On the one side, we ask that God would not look upon our sins or deny our prayers because of them, but that God would, in fact, forgive us for our sins and, through Christ, he does. On the other side of that two way street, it is our prayer that we, too, (as Luther says in the Catechism) will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us. The full and free forgiveness of God is what empowers us: to overcome doubt in our own lives and to forgive others as we have been forgiven. But even after a sin is confessed and even after God’s forgiveness is assured, that sin can leave ugly scars that last a long time. Sin always damages lives and relationships. Sometimes, those scars run deepest within a family. If you want to talk about scars of sin and strife within a family, the sons of Jacob had that in spades. Father Jacob had picked Joseph as his favorite son, so Joseph’s brothers did what every non-favorite would do. They got jealous – and one day, the envy that boiled in their heart bubbled over. They nabbed their brother and planned to kill Joseph. But “cooler heads” prevailed, so they ended up selling him into slavery instead. They put him out of sight and out of mind and got paid by the slave traders in the mean-time. Eventually, they assumed Joseph was dead, and they didn’t even have to get their hands dirty.

But Joseph was not dead. Far from it! The Lord was with him in Egypt. Through a series of highs and lows in his life, Joseph eventually became the right hand man of the Pharaoh. As the second most powerful man in Egypt, Joseph had a pretty nice life. He had a wife, two kids, and a great job. Things were good. Then came a blast from the past, and it hit him like a punch in the gut. Joseph’s brothers, the same brothers who had sold him into slavery and left him for dead, came down to Egypt to buy food during a famine. The last time Joseph had seen his brothers was as he looked back at them, while he was bound in chains and marched into slavery. After all those years, Joseph recognized his brothers, but they didn’t recognize him. Finally, after sending them back and forth between Egypt and Canaan, Joseph revealed himself: **“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!”** Can you imagine the shock? This hard-nosed Egyptian ruler is baby brother Joseph?! The brothers were terrified; and rightly so. They had carried out unspeakable evil on their own flesh and blood, so can you imagine what these men were thinking? The leader of the mighty nation of Egypt has an enormous axe to grind with us. Time to pay the piper. Joseph’s brothers were bracing themselves for the worst.

But vengeance isn’t what we see from Joseph. Instead, we see weeping. We see embraces of love. We see a tear filled reunion that we’d expect at the end of a sappy movie. The family was back together! Joseph was so overjoyed, he brought his father and all his brothers up to Egypt to live on the best part of the land. The strained relationship of the sons of Jacob had been repaired. All was right with the world and the sons of Jacob were ready to live happily ever after. But then Jacob died. **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?”** Dad is gone and Joseph’s brothers had to wonder, *was Joseph only treating us this well because of dad?* Maybe Joseph didn’t want to take his revenge while pops was still alive, but now that dad’s out of the picture, where does that leave us? Joseph’s tearful embraces, generous gifts, and forgiving words should have been enough to convince his brothers that there was no grudge, no animosity, no sin standing between them. Their guilt drove them to doubt Joseph’s forgiveness and caused them to be suspicious, even of their own brother who had assured them of his love.



Even after Joseph showed kindness and unbelievable generosity to his brothers, they were still racked by worry over their past sin. Almost like they couldn't believe they'd actually been forgiven. Sound familiar? Has it happened already to you this morning? A few minutes ago, you heard, *Hear the word of Christ through his called servant. I forgive you all your sins.* Even after hearing that God has removed your sin, are you plagued by that same question: What if? What if God didn't really forgive that sin? What if I forgot about that terrible, thoughtless, and selfish thing I did all those years ago and then it suddenly comes flooding back in a tsunami of guilt? What happens then? Even worse than the question of "what if?" is the possibility of an answer to that question. We know all too well what our sins deserve – death and eternal separation from God.

A guilty conscience is a terrible thing to live with. You can't sleep, you can't eat, you can't enjoy anything because guilt consumes you – mentally, emotionally, physically. If you're like me, it wouldn't take long to think of a particular sin in your past that you are especially ashamed of. And even though you've confessed that sin to God and laid it at the foot of the cross, the devil keeps waving it in front of your face. That's one of his favorite tricks. *Remember this one? You don't really think God could forgive you for that do you? And you call yourself a Christian?!* The father of lies speaks his native tongue to you, constantly trying to get you to question whether you can really trust what God says to you in Christ. What's the devil's end game? To drive the child of God to despair of God's grace and keep us locked in the prison of our past.

Joseph's brothers doubted Joseph's forgiveness and their consciences were burdened. The reason a conscience is burdened is uncertainty; uncertainty about forgiveness, uncertainty about what happens next, and ultimately uncertainty about what's going to shake out on the Last Day. But for the Christian, uncertainty doesn't make sense. We don't have a God of uncertainty. We have a God of truth, who says what he means and means what he says. And what does your Savior-God say to you? **Take heart, your sins are forgiven...There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.** Do you see what that means? In repentance when we confess our sins to God and trust that for Jesus' sake he forgives us, that's it. He doesn't put you on probation. He doesn't say, "*Clean up your act and then we'll see.*" Because of his empty cross and the empty tomb, he says to you, "*Those sins are mine now...you can't have them back!*" Think of all the ways he drives that point home through to our stubborn hearts: He calls an ordinary human to proclaim a divine truth – *As a called servant of Christ, I forgive you all your sins.* He puts before your eyes the baptismal font, where the Almighty God put his name on you, because you belong to him. He promises no one can pluck you from his hand – not the devil in your ear, not the moments of doubt in your heart, nothing. He invites you to stand shoulder to shoulder with your fellow sinner/saints so that he can forgive you with his own body and blood. He shows you that he'd rather die than hold your sins against you – *Do you believe me now?*

Joseph's brothers had done him wrong. He knew it. They knew it. **His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.** They were willing to put themselves into slavery, just like they had done to Joseph. But Joseph doesn't pour salt on their wound. Instead, he feels their pain and speaks words of assurance. **Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good."** Even though Joseph's brothers had nothing but evil intent in what they did to him, the Lord's purpose prevailed. God uses even those selfish actions of sinners to serve his ultimate purpose and to glorify his name. Joseph knew that it's God's job to be in charge and it was Joseph's job to forgive as he'd been forgiven. He was willing to let God settle any scores. It's our privilege as Christians to forgive as we have been forgiven.



Such a pious phrase is easy to say, but not so easy to do. When someone hurts me, the last thing I want to do is to forgive that person. *He robbed me of my innocence. She betrayed my trust. If he only knew half the pain he caused me...* Sin hurts. It stings. The sinful nature loves to hold grudges and refuses to give them up, because once we give up that grudge, we give up what we think is rightfully ours: our hurt feelings and wounded sense of pride. But really, holding a grudge is just choosing to live in our self-made prison of the past. Forgiveness swings open the cell door and sets us free. Sometimes, people reason that forgiving equates to saying, *“What that person did to me doesn’t matter.”* Hardly. Forgiveness means proclaiming the gospel – God doesn’t hold this sin against you and neither do I. And when you think about it, do we have any right to be angry or begrudge forgiveness to someone when we take an honest look at our own past? How can we refuse to show mercy when it has been abundantly shown to us? God forbid that we ever act like the unmerciful servant in our gospel lesson, refusing to forgive few bucks after we’d been forgiven a debt of billions!

As we live on this side of heaven, there will be times when we’re tempted to hold a grudge so that our selfish pride won’t lose face. At times, we’ll be tempted to think that forgiveness is a sign of weakness. Far from it. The gospel message of forgiveness in Christ is the very power of God for salvation. This power is yours now; your power to forgive others. Joseph told his fearful brothers, **“So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.** Joseph was empowered by God’s forgiveness to forgive his brothers. We have been forgiven of an eternal debt because Jesus paid our tab with his own life. Now we have a debt of love to show love to our neighbor, both to those who treat us right and to those who have done us wrong.

Instead of seeking revenge, Joseph forgave. Instead of giving his brothers a piece of his mind, he gave them peace of mind. He comforted them, he assured them, he loved them. You, dear Christian, have been unburdened. The eternal weight of your sin has been lifted from your shoulders because of Christ. So go unburden someone else. Forgiveness isn’t weakness. It’s power; the very power of God that empowers us to forgive as we have been forgiven – freely, fully, for good. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. God grant it, for Jesus’ sake.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)