# FORGIVE

Genesis 45:3-15 | Seventh Sunday after Epiphany | February 21/24, 2019

*Joseph said: "it was not you who sent me here, but God."*

**J.J.**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

See if you can recognize this movie quote: *"I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. If you are looking for ransom I can tell you I don't have money, but what I do have are a very particular set of skills. Skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you. If you let my daughter go now that'll be the end of it. I will not look for you, I will not pursue you, but if you don't, I will look for you, I will find you and I will kill you."*

Those are the words of actor Liam Neeson in the movie *Taken*, which has now spawned two sequels and a television series. In the original movie Neeson plays a retired CIA operative whose daughter is kidnapped. He then uses his "particular set of skills" to find and free his daughter and take revenge on her captors. The *Taken* movies have pulled in almost $1 billion at the worldwide box office.

There are lots of other movies with similar plots. Why are stories about revenge so popular? I have a theory. I think it's because revenge is our natural inclination. If someone hurts you, you hurt them back. Forgiveness is for the weak.

Thankfully our God is not weak. He is **the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, [7] maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.** God does say, **"It is mine to avenge,"** (Deut. 32:25), but his first thought is not of vengeance but of forgiveness.

The portion of God's Word before us today is a beautiful story of forgiveness. There is perhaps no one else in history who was in a better position to serve up a cold dish of revenge than Joseph. He could have made his brothers pay big time, but he didn't. Why? I think there are two reasons. Joseph remembered God's pardon, and he remembered God's plan. Friends, those two reasons are also our reasons to FORGIVE.

## I. Remembering God's Pardon

To understand the events of our text we need to understand the events leading up to it. Let me give you the *Cliff's Notes* version: Joseph was the beloved son of Jacob. In fact, Jacob loved him more than all his other sons, a fact he made obvious by giving Joseph – and only Joseph – a "richly ornamented robe." The brothers noticed this favoritism and hated Joseph for it.

Then Joseph had some dreams that didn't help matters. In them he saw his brothers and even his father bowing down to him. They hated him even more. So much so

that one day, when Joseph came out to visit them in fields, they hatched a plot to kill him. Reuben, the oldest brother, intervened. Rather than killing Joseph, they sold him into slavery. The brothers then took Joseph's special robe, covered it in goat's blood, and told his father Jacob that a wild animal had killed him.

Joseph ended up in Egypt where he was falsely accused and sent to prison. But God was with him. He enabled Joseph to interpret some dreams for Pharaoh and gain his favor. The dreams predicted 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine. Joseph suggested a plan to Pharaoh. Carefully store up grain during the years of plenty to get the country through the years of famine. Pharaoh was so impressed that he made Joseph is second in command. Again, God was with him.

Now Joseph, second in command of all Egypt, one of the most powerful men in the world, has his brothers right where he wants them. These are the men who sold him into slavery, the men who separated him from his father and family and caused him years of hardship. He could have imprisoned them. He could have tortured them. He could have ordered their immediate execution. At the very least he could have given them a stern tongue lashing. But he didn't do any of that. Instead, he simply forgave them.

After revealing his identity, Joseph said to his understandably terrified brothers: **"Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! [5] And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here.**

Joseph's patience and restraint are truly amazing. Who of us wouldn't have at the very least given those brothers a piece of our mind. "How dare you! Do you know what you put me through! Do you know what you put dad through!" No instead, he was so very gentle with them. He spoke kind words to them.

Why? His brothers didn't deserve such kind treatment. And that's exactly the point. Joseph wasn't treating them as they deserved. He was dealing with them graciously – the same way God had always dealt with him. Joseph served the God of mercy and compassion, the God who loves and forgives, the God who graciously pardoned him for all his sins. In thanks for God's forgiveness, Joseph forgave his brothers.

Each week we pray together as our Savior has taught us: **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."** God's gracious forgiveness is the catalyst that moves us to forgive others.

We look at the cross and we see our sins. Our arrogance and anger, our desire to get even, our unforgiving hearts. Our sins put Jesus on that cross. Our sins pierced his hands, his feet, his brow. Our sins sent him to hell in our place.

But we see more than that. We look at the cross and we get a glimpse of the forgiving heart of God, a God who so desires a relationship with us that he sent his own

Son to bear the punishment for the sin that destroyed our relationship, a God who would rather suffer hell in our place than be without us in heaven, a God whose greatest desire is to forgive.

My friends, remember that. Remember God's gracious pardon. You are forgiven. That wonderful truth enables you to forgive others when they sin against you. Yes, remember God's pardon. And remember his plan too.

**II. Remembering God's Plan**

Joseph did. He explained it to his brothers as they stood there with their mouths hanging open. **"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! [5] 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. [6] For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping.[7] But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."** And then he came to the main point: **"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God."**

In all this, Joseph never downplayed his brothers' sin. He never even hinted that their actions were OK. He simply stated that God had a plan through it all, that God brought good even from their evil deeds. You see, God used their sin to get Joseph to Egypt, where he raised him up to a position of power and influence. Joseph's plan to deal with the famine saved many thousands of lives, including those of his family. He brought them to Egypt, to the fertile land of Goshen, where they grew into a great nation, just as God had promised Abraham. The world's Savior would come from that nation. About 1,900 years after the events of our text, it happened. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So you see, God was working behind the scenes not just to save many lives in a time of famine, but to preserve a nation and save the world through his only Son. That's the "great deliverance" Joseph was talking about.

God has given us a wonderful promise. We know it well. **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose** (Romans 8:28). In <u>all things</u> God is working for our good – even those things that are terrible, things that we struggle to forgive.

Years of a father's verbal abuse. Lies and betrayal by a trusted friend. A spouse's infidelity. A life stolen by a drunk driver. Can we really forgive such things? Can we really let them go along with the pain and suffering they have caused us? Yes, we can. But only in Christ. As Paul said, **"I can do all things through him who gives me strength"** (Philippians 4:13). In Christ, we can forgive, in spite of our pain and anguish, trusting that God will cause it all to work out for our eternal good.

Like Joseph, when we forgive, we're not saying that what the person did to us was OK. Just the opposite. We're saying that it was wrong, that it's something that has to be forgiven. Nor are we saying that the

forgiveness is deserved. Forgiveness never is. We're simply saying, from one undeserving sinner to another: "I don't hold against you the wrong that you did to me. I'm not going to try to get even, or make you pay. I forgive you."

Those are three of the hardest words to say. How can we do it? Listen to what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you** (4:32). What would this world be like if everyone lived by those words? Hard to imagine. Let's just say it would be a very different place. How do we get to such a place? Christ is the key. Look to him. Look to his cross. That's where you'll find the power to pardon. It's at the cross that God gives us our own" particular set of skills," skills that are not at all about revenge. Just the opposite. Our God empowers us by the love of his Son to forgive and to forget.

By the way, I want you to note the manner in which Joseph forgave his brothers. He wasn't distant or aloof. He invited them to come close. He embraced them and wept over them. When you forgive someone, there are ways to let them know you mean it. Look them in the eye. Extend your hand. Give them a hug. Wrap them up in the same forgiving that your Savior has shown to you.

Liam Neeson's latest movie is called *Cold Pursuit*. Here's the plot summary which I read online: "A snowplow driver seeks revenge against the drug dealers he thinks killed his son" (IMDB). It will be popular.

People love to see "bad guys" get what they deserve. My friends, thank God, that he doesn't give "bad guys" like us what we deserve. Yes, thank him by not giving other "bad guys" what they deserve. Instead, in Jesus, forgive. Amen.

**S.D.G.**