

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Forgiving one another - Genesis 42:1-45:15

John Smith was in prison, unjustly convicted on the basis of false evidence supplied by a rival gang who wanted him out of the way. During those years in prison, he thought only of how he would get his own back on those who had sent him there. On the day of his release, consumed by hatred, he began to execute his terrible revenge.

That's only a pretend story. In contrast, the story of Joseph is true and is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. In the past few weeks, we have seen how he was sold into slavery by his brothers. For 13 long years he had served, first as a slave in the house of a wealthy Egyptian, Potiphar, and then in jail, unjustly accused by Potiphar's wife. The story of Joseph might have turned out just like that of John Smith but, as we shall see today, that story stands as one of the outstanding stories of forgiveness in the Bible.

God was with Joseph and, for 7 years now, he had been prime minister of Egypt, second only in the land to Pharaoh. During those seven years of plenty, he had been charged by Pharaoh to gather in the harvests against the seven years of famine that were to follow. So we read, "The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians...So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands" (Genesis 41:56-57).

As we take up our story this morning in Genesis chapter 42, that famine had now spread to Canaan where Jacob, Joseph's father, and his family lived. Jacob sends his ten sons, Joseph's half-brothers, down into Egypt to buy food. Losing Joseph had been tragedy enough for Jacob, who would not send Benjamin, his youngest son and Joseph's brother, lest he lose him also.

So Joseph's brothers come to him to buy food. We read, "And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth" (verse 6). They do not recognise Joseph in all his regalia as second in the land of Egypt, though Joseph readily recognises them. Did Joseph remember then, I wonder, his teen-age dreams of his brothers' sheaves of corn bowing down to his sheaf, and of the sun, moon and the eleven stars bowing down to him (see Genesis chapter 37)? It was the envy those dreams had generated that partly turned his brothers against him.

In any other story, we might have thought that Joseph would have seen this as his ideal opportunity to get his own back on his brothers - revenge for their rejection of him, for selling him to the Midianites for twenty pieces of silver, the price of a slave, for that enforced 300 mile march as a prisoner from Canaan to Egypt, for those years of servitude in Potiphar's house; and, finally, for those awful years in prison. On the contrary, there was no thought of vengeance in Joseph's heart. But first he has to find out whether there has been any change of heart on his brothers' part.

When his brothers tell Joseph of their youngest brother at home, Joseph challenges them, when next they come, to bring him with them. The brothers realise that their father, Jacob, would not agree to this and feel trapped. Unaware that Joseph can understand their speech, they say, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us" (verse 21). Their obvious sorrow for their past treatment of Joseph moves Joseph to tears and he is forced to hide his face from them.

The brothers return home with the sacks of corn they had purchased and find, to their surprise, that their money has been returned, hidden in their sacks. Their father is glad to see them back but is adamant that Benjamin will not go down to Egypt.

In chapter 43, we find that the corn has run out and Jacob wants his sons to go back to Egypt and buy more. The brothers point out the impossibility of doing this without Benjamin. Very reluctantly, Jacob sends them on their way with double money, with presents for this unknown Egyptian - and with Benjamin. Jacob allows Benjamin to go only because Judah has promised to be surety for him. Judah, who had helped to get rid of one brother, now pledges his life for another - so much had Judah's heart changed.

On arriving in Egypt, the brothers are taken into Joseph's presence. On seeing Benjamin, Joseph is moved to tears and, once again, has momentarily to leave his brothers to recover. When he returns, he invites his brothers to sit before him for a meal. To their very great surprise, they find themselves seated in order of seniority!

The brothers set off home with their sacks of corn, totally unaware that Joseph had commanded his steward to hide Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack (see chapter 44). They had scarcely left the city when Joseph's servants catch up with them and demand the return of Joseph's silver cup. The brothers protest their innocence and go so far as to say, "With whomsoever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we will also be my lord's slaves" (verse 9). Consternation and despair, of course, break out when the cup is found in Benjamin's sack. Would the brothers abandon Benjamin as they had once abandoned Joseph? No, the brothers all return and are brought into Joseph's presence. Once again, they fall down before him.

But once again, we see their change of heart. Judah pleads with the still unrecognised Joseph, "Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father?" (verses 33 and 34). When they had sold Joseph as a slave, those same brothers had thought nothing of the distress which Joseph's supposed death would bring to their father, Jacob.

Joseph can no longer contain his tears and commands all his servants to leave them. Then, in front of his brothers, Joseph weeps so loudly that his weeping is heard throughout the house. In their wonderment, the brothers hear him say, "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" (45:3) The brothers are totally dismayed by this statement, recognising that Joseph now has the upper hand over them. His next words must have reassured them: "Please come near to me...I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God" (45:3-8). He then goes on to tell them that they must bring their father, Jacob, and make their home here in Egypt with Joseph.

God's forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel. The book of Genesis has been aptly described as 'the seed plot of the Bible'. That is because many of the great themes of the Bible which come to fruition in the New Testament are found in picture form in Genesis. It is striking, and I believe significant, that here in the first book of the Bible we have this very dramatic picture of forgiveness. It is a picture which, in many ways, foreshadows God's forgiveness today to repentant sinners. At the same time, it is an important picture of the forgiveness we ought to be ready to show to one another.

It was a tragedy that Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery when he had come seeking their welfare (see Genesis 37). It was a tragedy that famine struck not only the land of Egypt but the countries around it, too. But God turned tragedy into triumph through Joseph. Joseph recognised that when he said, "God sent me before you to preserve life".

That message is clearly recognised by the apostle Peter in his first sermon in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. There he could say, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know - Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death...This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses...Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:22-42).

Those who heard Peter were, like Joseph's brothers, cut to the heart and ask, "What shall we do?" Peter answers, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus for the remission (or, forgiveness) of sins". It is important to notice the emphasis that Peter puts upon repentance as a necessary first part to the forgiveness of God. So Joseph, too, looked for repentance on the part of his brothers before he was able fully to unfold to them all that was in his heart of love for them.

Repentance is more than being sorry for my sin. So often we can be sorry that we have been found out, but would gladly do it again, given the opportunity! That is not repentance! In the biblical sense, repentance is not only being sorry for my sin but also turning away from it. It is a change of mind and heart that involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. So Paul could write to those early Thessalonian Christians, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus. It is striking that his opening message to the people was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". He then reminded the people, the tax collectors, and the soldiers of the change of lifestyle that should accompany repentance (Luke 3:1-18). At the same time, as Jesus walked by the River Jordan, John points Him out with this first public testimony to Christ, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). As he took his farewell of the elders of Ephesus, Paul

sums up his lifetime of ministry as “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

Jesus’ first words as He hung on the cross of Calvary were, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). As Joseph’s heart of love went out to his brothers, so Jesus’ heart of love goes out here to those who were crucifying Him. But Jesus went on to suffer on that cross the wrath of a righteous God against sin so that sinners might be righteously forgiven. That was why He had to cry out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

As we have seen, the theme of forgiveness is vividly portrayed in the first book of the Bible. That theme of God’s forgiveness carries on throughout the Bible until we meet it for the last time in 1 John. There John makes two important statements concerning forgiveness. Firstly, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). The repentant sinner who comes to Christ, confessing his or her sins and believing that Christ died on the cross for those sins need have no doubt whatever about the forgiveness of God. God Himself has promised it to all such! Even Joseph’s brothers lacked confidence in Joseph’s forgiveness. When their father, Jacob, died, they came to Joseph with some made up story of how their father, just before he died, begged Joseph still to forgive his brothers. Once again, Joseph wept before them, this time because they so little appreciated all the love that he had in his heart for them. As believers, we can rejoice in the certain knowledge of sins forgiven for Christ’s sake. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear...We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:18-19).

John’s second statement is equally important: “I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake” (1 John 2:12). In this chapter, John writes to Christians of differing degrees of maturity: little children, young men, fathers. These words of John emphasise the fact that the knowledge of sins forgiven is the privilege of the youngest believer in the Lord Jesus. It requires no special intelligence, no special penance, but simply faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

So far, we have spent some time on this glorious subject of God’s forgiveness, and rightly so. But the story of Joseph is a picture not only of God’s forgiveness but also of that forgiveness that we ought to be ready to show to one another. That is also an important lesson in the New Testament. Matthew tells us, “Then Peter came to [Jesus] and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18:21-35). The words of Jesus do not mean that we forgive only until we have carefully counted 490 wrongs against us! Rather, they are a message of forgiving, and going on forgiving, and forgiving.

Jesus then went on to tell a story of a servant who owed his king a huge sum, ten thousand talents (in today’s money, about two million pounds). When the servant was unable to pay, the king magnanimously forgave him. The servant went out and immediately had thrown into prison a man who owed him a hundred denarii (in today’s money, about three pounds). When the king heard of this, he was furious, rightly so, and had the servant thrown into prison.

The message of Jesus is plain. As Christians, we have been forgiven the enormous debt of our sins by God. We need to be ready to show that same forgiveness to others. So Paul writes to the Ephesians, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you” (4:31-32).

Life is too short to hang on to differences that divide us, hurts (imaginary or real) that we refuse to let go. After all, as believers we are going to share heaven with one another and, above all, with the One who has forgiven us all our sins! Let us be ready to settle our differences in the spirit of true forgiveness. In what is commonly known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’, Jesus tells us that the time to do it is right now, before going to church this morning (Matthew 5:23-24)!

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