

Genesis 50:15-21

Dear Friends in Christ,

In case you are tempted to think that the heroes of faith in the Old Testament had it great, that they had it made and everything always went well in their families, just think about Jacob and his family for a minute. Jacob had conspired with his mother against his father and his brother to make sure that he got the better blessing. When Esau found out what had happened he made plans to kill Jacob once his father was dead. Jacob fled to his uncle Laban for safety. His uncle Laban did all he could to get Jacob to work for him for free, starting with the fact that he gave him the wrong daughter on his wedding day. This resulted in all kinds of family trouble for Jacob. He had two wives. One he loved and one he never wanted in the first place, but the one he love wasn't having any children and the one he never wanted did have children. His two wives started competing with each other over how many children they could have for Jacob and, between them and their two maids, Jacob had twelve boys and a girl. Since Joseph was the first born child of the wife he loved, and since his beloved wife Rachel died after the birth of her second son, Jacob gave Joseph special treatment—the coat of many colors only made obvious what everyone already knew. Because he was daddy's favorite Joseph was what we might call today a spoiled brat. When he had some dreams that showed his family bowing down before him he bragged about it and threw it in their faces. That was the last straw for his brothers. The first chance they got they beat him up, threw him in a pit and then sold him as a slave to some Ishmaelite relatives who were passing by. That's not what you would call an ideal family.

Fast forward almost 40 years. Joseph had ended up in Egypt. He had interpreted Pharaoh's dream and been put in charge of managing Egypt's food supply. When his brothers showed up to purchase food he tested them for a while and finally revealed his identity to them. He brought their father Jacob and all that they had to live with him in Egypt. Now Jacob had died and we see that there was still trouble in the family. This time the trouble wasn't a result of favoritism or jealousy. This time the trouble was the result of something even more powerful and dangerous—guilt.

For 40 years Joseph's brothers had struggled with guilt. It must have really hit home when they came to Jacob and showed their father Joseph's robe they had ripped and dipped in animal blood to cover up what they had done. It must have really hit home when they saw how what they had done affected their father. He was never the same after that day and they didn't tell him the truth about what had happened to Joseph until Joseph revealed himself to them and invited them to come and live in Egypt where there was food. Their guilt reared its ugly head again as Joseph tested them before they knew who he was, accusing them of being spies and having them arrested and keeping Benjamin behind—They thought “all this is happening to us because of what we did to Joseph.”

Now, even though Joseph had been nothing but kind to them, their guilt made them worried. The power of their guilt made them think of how they deserved to be punished. It made them imagine all the things that Joseph, from his position of power, could do to them to get back at them, to get even.

Finally, after being under the power of guilt for almost 40 years, seemingly at the suggestion of their dying father, they did the one thing that can destroy the power of guilt. They humbly confessed their sin, not only to God, but to the one they had wronged, to Joseph. They sent

him word, possibly by Benjamin, confessing that they had wronged him and asking for forgiveness. Then they showed up in person to show Joseph clearly that they were repentant and wanted his forgiveness. They even did the thing that had made them so angry when Joseph had first related his dreams to them; they threw themselves down before him and said, **we are your slaves.**

Guilt is a powerful thing. It can cause problems in families and in people's lives for decades. People can try to silence their guilt by ignoring it, covering it up, keeping themselves so busy they don't have time to think about it, or they can try to drown it with alcohol or medicate it away with drugs. But guilt is so powerful that none of those things will work. In fact those things will just add to the power of guilt by heaping one sin on top of another. There is only one thing that can rob guilt of its power. Confession followed by absolution.

Of the two men praying in the temple only the one who prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" went home justified. Guilt will have power over us and keep us from enjoying life the way we could as long as we refuse to confess our sins to God, and to any we have wronged. As David says, **when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

Guilt is a powerful thing, but forgiveness is even more powerful. Contrary to what their guilty hearts were telling them, Joseph was not holding a grudge against them for what they had done to him. He wasn't wasting his time trying to come up with all kinds of ways to pay his brothers back for what they had done to him. He wasn't just treating them nicely, biding his time until Jacob was out of the picture before he would strike. Whether Jacob was around or not he was going to continue to provide for them in the land of Goshen.

How could Joseph do it? How could he possibly forgive his brothers for the terrible things they did to him?

First of all he realized the principle that is repeated a number of times in Scripture. **It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.** Joseph assured his brothers that, though he may have had earthly power over them as second in command in Egypt, the power to punish them for their sins was not his. That power belongs to God alone.

That's something to think about. If we are holding a grudge against someone; if we are thinking up ways that we can make them pay for what they have done to us; we are sinning not only against them, but against God. We are committing idolatry by thinking that we have the right to do something that God says only he can do.

The other thing that helped Joseph get past what his brothers had done to him and all the bad things that had happened to him as a result of what they had done was seeing what God had done. Joseph didn't excuse their sin. He didn't say, "That's OK, it's no big deal." That would have been a lie. It was a big deal. Joseph said, what you did was wrong. You intended to harm me. That was your plan. But God had another plan and God's plans always trump anyone else's plans. It was God's plan to use your evil plans for good. It was God's plan to use your evil plans to get me to Egypt and have me in the right place at the right time to save the lives of millions of people. And instead of bringing evil on you because of your sin against me he even planned to have me save your lives. It was seeing the hand of God, the good and gracious plans of God that enabled Joseph to forgive his brothers for all the evil they had done to him.

That's the way that God works. We see it not only in Joseph's life, but most importantly, we see it in Jesus' life. We see how God took the evil plans of the Jewish leaders and used them to save the lives of all people, including the lives of those leaders. They hated Jesus and successfully carried out their plans to falsely accuse him and have him executed. But Jesus' execution was always a part of God's plan to forgive the sins of the whole world. When Jesus rose from the dead he didn't go after those Jewish leaders who had wronged him. He commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel and gave them the opportunity to witness to those who had planned his execution and tell that that he had paid for their sins too.

As we heard in Jesus' parable, we are the one who has a debt with God that we could never repay in millions of years. But Jesus paid our debt for us and God has proclaimed to us, "Your entire debt is forgiven." For us then to hold a grudge and be unforgiving toward a fellow human being whose debt with us is hardly noticeable by comparison is like the unforgiving servant in the parable. Instead, like Joseph, when we see how God is active in our lives, turning evil into good even now, but most importantly, paying the debt of sin we could never repay so that we can live with him eternally, we will find that we have an amazing power. We have the power to forgive others when they sin against us. In fact, Jesus has given us the power of the keys. He has told us that if we forgive anyone who, like Joseph's brothers, confess their sins to us, then he considers those sins forgiven too. He gives us the power to speak for him and to unlock the doors to heaven. He gives us the power to set people free from guilt.

Like Jacob's family, we have problems in our families too. Guilt is a powerful thing. It can destroy relationships and rip families apart. But it doesn't have to. If there is something you need to take care of in your family, don't wait 40 years. The first step to destroying the power of guilt is to confess your sins, to God, but also to the one you have sinned against. Then an even greater power can have an effect on your life and your family, the power of forgiveness. It's the power that Jesus made possible by the forgiveness he won for you and for the whole world. It's the power he gives to believers, the power to forgive the sins of those who repent so that they may be comforted.

Know the power of guilt, but even more importantly, know and make use of the power of forgiveness. Forgive, as in Christ, God has forgiven you.