



How many of you are familiar with the story of Joseph? It is an incredible story in Scripture about a man who had a really incredible experience with God throughout his life. If there has ever been anyone in Scripture who exemplifies what we have been talking about in this sermon series, 'Healing for Broken Relationships,' it would be Joseph. Think about all he experienced in his life—betrayed by his brothers, thrown into an abandoned cistern, sold into slavery, carried off to Egypt, sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. If there has been anyone in the Scriptures that we can look to and say, "How did he deal with that? How did he get past that brokenness?" would it not be Joseph?

We are going to look at Joseph and particularly at those things in his life and things in our lives that prevent us from forgiving. The passage we read is sort of the end of the story of Joseph's life; but to be honest with you, it could be one of the most tender, sweetest passages of Scripture as the writer of Genesis describes to us this incredible reunion with Joseph and his brothers weeping and embracing, kissing. Can you imagine being in that room and seeing such a deep outpouring of emotion of brothers who had betrayed and been betrayed reconcile and forgive one another?

Because of his brothers' actions, Joseph spent most of his life as a prisoner. He was imprisoned and kept in captivity for the majority of his life because of what someone else did to him. It was not until this moment when he was able to truly forgive his brothers that Joseph was a prisoner no more. In our lives, many days serve as an obstacle to forgiveness. Many things can block us from offering forgiveness to someone else. As long as those obstacles remain in place, we too remain imprisoned; but when we can learn to truly forgive—like Joseph—we become a prisoner no more. Let's talk about some of those things that prevent us from forgiving.

What is it in our lives that prevent us from forgiving? One thing that we can definitely suggest is our memories. Our memories often block our ability to forgive. Think about Joseph—do you think that Joseph had memories that he had a hard time getting past? Do you think that, during those countless nights in an Egyptian prison alone in the dark with nothing but his thoughts, do you not think that he went back to the day his brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery? To be honest with you, if Joseph was anything like me—and I am guessing perhaps anything like you—I am sure he did struggle with those memories.

Do you ever allow your memories to prevent you from forgiving someone? Have you ever said these words, "I want to forgive, but I just can't forget..."? I know I have. Somewhere along the line, we have convinced ourselves that our ability to forgive is directly tied to our ability to forget. Some things will always be in our memories—as long as we live. There are memories that we will take to the grave—the soldier that cannot forget the war, the adult who cannot forget their childhood, the ex-spouse who cannot forgive the divorce. Our memories are a part of us. We do ourselves a disservice by saying that we cannot forgive because we cannot forget. The message of the Gospel was not intended to erase our memories—it was

intended to heal our memories.

Many of you today are struggling with memories—memories that you just cannot get past—and I know that God has been stirring hearts during this message series. Maybe today is a day you invite God to begin healing some memories in your life. We cannot allow our memories to imprison us. We must let the power of the Gospel to heal those memories of our past, to help us get beyond what was yesterday. We need to acknowledge those memories and see them for what they are and surrender them to God. If we do not, they will rule over us like chains wrapped around our hearts and minds.

Do you know what else can prevent us from forgiving? Not just our memories, but unresolved issues in our lives. Let us just be honest—don't we all have hurts and hang ups and habits inside of us that we have yet to deal with? The older I get, the more I realize how many of those things are existing in my life. Those unsettled issues that leave us with unsettled spirits. Those things interfere with our relationship with God, and they surely interfere with our relationship with others. They leave us sometimes with a pattern of broken relationships. They leave us with a deep sense of low self esteem, a sense of anxiety that overwhelms us, a cloud of depression sometimes. These unresolved issues often leave us even with the experience of physical pain.

It has been my experience that it usually leaves unresolved issues in our lives. They get expressed through an emotion that we call anger. Have you ever known someone who was just angry all the time—for no particular reason—just angry? Have you yourself ever gone through a season in your life—whether it was weeks, months or even years—where you were just ticked off at the world and did not know why? As surely as night follows the day, anger follows unresolved issues in our lives. Before I continue, I want you to know that anger is just an emotion that God gave to us; and anger in and of itself is neither good nor bad—it is what it is. It is anger—but when our anger is improperly expressed, it always leads to sin. That is why we have to learn to get a grip on our anger before our anger gets a grip on us.

The Bible says in Ephesians chapter four, verses 26 and 27: "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foot hold." The apostle writes these words to the church in Ephesus, and he is writing them to us reminding us that if we allow issues to go unresolved in our lives—if we let the sun go down on our anger—we give the devil an opportunity to get a grip on our lives. I cannot read that passage without thinking about an experience I had in the sixth grade.

In gym class, our physical education teacher one day said, "Boys, we're going to learn to wrestle." We spent about six weeks learning how to wrestle, and I was paired up with one of my best friends. His name was Mike, and Mike was about a head taller than me and about thirty pounds heavier than me. I knew I was in trouble, but I had cat like reflexes—I was quick. My strategy was to keep moving as fast as I could around the mat because I knew if Mike got a hold of me I was done for. That philosophy—that strategy—lasted about five minutes. Guess what happened—after five minutes of constantly running around the mat, I became tired. I slowed down and stayed in one spot, and Mike kind of closed in on me and grabbed me and threw me to the mat. At one point as I tried to get away, he literally grabbed me by the foot and lifted me upside down.

Anger is like that. When we stay in one spot in our lives—continually rehearsing an unresolved issue over and over and over again in our hearts and minds—we be-

come angry and frustrated, and the devil gets a foothold on us. Anger that comes as a result of unresolved issues is like staying in one spot. Do you think Joseph was ever angry about what happened to him? Do you think that as he thought about his brothers and what they did to him—as he thought about the reasons he was falsely imprisoned—do you ever think he had the tendency to get upset about that? Again, if he is anything like me, he probably did. And I wonder sometimes if that anger could have blocked his ability to forgive his brothers. If Joseph had not resolved those issues in his life, I wonder whether or not Genesis 45 and that wonderful reunion story would have ever taken place. Do you allow your anger to prevent you from forgiving?

Something else that affects our ability to forgive is our pride. Have you ever been wronged by someone? Someone said something about you, someone did something to you and you kind of take this attitude, “There is no way I am going to forgive them. I am bigger than they are. I am better than they are.” Have you ever felt that way—or am I the only one in the room? What happens to us when someone does something wrong to us with malicious intent—whether they speak it or say or do it or whatever they do to us—it belittles us. It takes a chunk out of us and makes us smaller than what we were. It is a natural human instinct to want to make ourselves bigger. We puff ourselves up, and that is the very definition of pride. Sometimes our pride prevents us from forgiving.

We know that pride was one of the issues in Joseph’s life that helped lead him to that predicament that he was in. If you know the story of Joseph, you know that he was his daddy’s favorite—out of twelve sons, Joseph was the one. He was proud about that. If you know the story of Joseph, you know that his dad gave him a coat of many colors. If Joseph would have lived in the 80s, it would have been a Member’s Only jacket. If he lived in the 90s, it would have been a Starter jacket. If he would have lived now, it would have been a Hoodie or something. In fact, it was a robe; and that robe of many colors distinguished Joseph from his other brothers so that everybody who saw him—including those brothers—said, “Yea, that’s dad’s favorite.” He was proud of that.

Joseph had ability, according to the Bible, to dream dreams and to interpret dreams. He was proud of that as well; and at the end of the story, Joseph was in a position where he was the second in command of all the Egyptian empire—second only to Pharaoh himself. Do you think that maybe he might have been tempted to use pride in that lofty position to say, “Now I got my brothers exactly where I want them”—but he did not. Throughout Scripture, the Bible tells us that Joseph was favored by God—that he was a man of integrity—and that tells me that he went to God for the healing of those memories that he had. He did not let the devil get a foothold on his life. He allowed God to heal him of that anger as well; and in those times when he felt prideful, he learned to humble himself. Until we learn to humble ourselves, we will always remain imprisoned by unforgiveness.

So what do we do? What can free us to forgive? How do we get past these obstacles that act as chains around our hearts? First and foremost, we can pray. We can call on the name of the Lord for help, for strength, for peace, for healing, for forgiveness; and maybe you are here today and have never really prayed before in your life. Maybe you are just kind of here today wondering what all this stuff is about, and maybe a prayer that you need to pray today is to ask Jesus Christ to be your Savior. Until we do that, we really cannot deal with anything else.

I want to encourage you and invite you to pray a prayer that just invites Christ into your life. There is a refuge of peace called the Cross, and until we humble ourselves

and come to that Cross and invite Christ into our lives as Savior, we will never find peace. Some of you have already done that years ago; and maybe a prayer that you need to pray today is not that Jesus would just be your Savior, but that He would be your Lord—that He would reign over every aspect of your life, that you would open the door of many of the rooms of your heart to allow Him to not be just the ‘resident’ of your heart, but the ‘president’ of your heart. I have been told that there are just some things that will not happen until we pray. Before you do anything else, pray—and then pray some more—but there are some other things that we can do to get past these obstacles.

We can talk—and by that I mean we can talk to someone we trust, someone that we love, someone that we know loves us. Whether it is a friend or a family member or someone else we are acquainted with, we can talk to them to share some of that hurt or pain just to get something off our chest. Have you ever had the need just to vent—to find someone who could be a sounding board for you? I know that many of you are involved in Emmaus share groups. You know that those share groups are wonderful places to get some things off your chest and vent—just to talk. Maybe some of you do not have someone in your life like that—but you know what you can do? You can do what Abraham Lincoln use to do.

I read that, during his presidency, Abraham Lincoln took a great deal of heat for many different things. The media hounded him because of an unpopular war called the Civil War, and his opponents in Congress hounded him—ridiculed him—for many of the policies he took, including his opposition to slavery. I read somewhere that Abraham Lincoln used to write letters to those opponents. He would just pour out his emotions, his feelings, his thoughts. He would tell him exactly what he thought about them. He would put that letter in an envelope and seal it and address it to them; and then he would burn it because he knew that he could not spew that venom on other people no more than we can. That act of getting those thoughts and feelings out on paper—articulating what was going on inside his heart—that freed him to focus on more important things. Maybe you need to write a letter and burn it.

We can pray and we can talk—we can also listen. We can listen to people who offer us Godly counsel—whether it is that friend or family member, or maybe it is someone in this church. I know as well as you do that there are many staff members and pastors in this church who can offer sound, Godly counsel to you. Many of them have been trained in this very field, and maybe what you need to do in the weeks ahead is pick up the phone and make an appointment with one of them. We need people in our lives who are going to speak grace to us, but we also need some people who will speak truth to us.

Pray and talk and listen; and the fourth thing I would share with you that frees us to forgive is learn—by that, I mean read. Read the Scriptures. Open up the Bible everyday and allow the holy Word of God to flood your soul with grace and truth and peace and mercy and love. I have found such joy in starting my day with daily devotions before I talk with anyone or check an e-mail—just opening up the Bible and letting God speak to me. Learn from God.

Unforgiveness imprisons us—it puts our hearts in a cage—but when we learn to forgive someone else, it is like a gift. Forgiveness is like a gift—it is a gift that we offer to someone else. The very best definition I have ever heard about forgiveness is this: forgiveness is me giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me—that when we forgive someone, we surrender our right to hurt them because they hurt us. That is what forgiveness is—it is a gift that we offer because we know that it is a gift

that God gave us. Ultimately, forgiveness is a gift that we give ourselves. When we forgive someone else, it sets us free—no longer in chains.

Many of you are, perhaps, on the edge of forgiveness; and maybe there is just one thing in your life that keeps preventing you from reconciling with that person. I sense that there has been a growing excitement in this church—that many of you are standing on tiptoe as you anticipate what God is going to do next. I hope that the Holy Spirit is stirring our hearts even at this moment, revealing to us some of those obstacles in our lives that we just cannot seem to get past. I hope that God begins to heal our memories. I hope that God gives us an ability to resolve some of those issues and let go of our anger. I hope that God reminds us how big He is and how small we really are so that we would not be proud, but be humble. I hope that many of us find that we are so excited about what God is doing that we can barely sit still or hold a thought in our head. I hope that you feel a kind of excitement that is stirring in you that only a free person can feel. I hope that many of us are ready to move past those things that block our ability to forgive and become a prisoner no more. I hope.