

When Forgiveness Seems Impossible

WE KNOW THAT BITTERNESS HINDERS OUR EFFECTIVENESS FOR GOD. BUT HOW MUCH FORGIVENESS IS ENOUGH?

Most of us have times in our lives when we are pushed to our limits with regard to forgiving others. I have vowed not to retell my story, but suffice it to say, I had never been hurt so deeply before or since.

I couldn't discuss it with my family members. But one friend from Romania was far removed from the situation, so I was able to tell him everything.

When I finished my story, he said to me: "You must totally forgive them."

"I can't," I replied.

"You can, and you must," he insisted. "R.T., you must totally forgive them. Release them, and you will be set free."

It was the hardest thing I had ever been asked to do. But an unexpected blessing emerged as I began to forgive: A wonderful peace came into my heart that I hadn't felt in years.

I have come to believe that the only way to move beyond the hurt and go forward in life is through total forgiveness. This message dramatically changed my heart, and I began to teach it from place to place.

After my teaching, people often came up to me with this question: "How do I know when I have totally forgiven someone?" I didn't know how to answer them.

The question bothered me so much that I began to search for an

answer. I found it—unexpectedly, when I began preaching about the life of Joseph. His story provides a heart-searching frame of reference by showing us how he was able to totally forgive.

JOSEPH'S EXAMPLE Joseph's brothers had conspired to kill him because they were jealous of the attention he got from their father and because of his dreams that his family would one day be subject to him (see Gen. 37:6-9). There was nothing wrong with Joseph's dream interpretation, but there was a lot wrong with Joseph.

God's hand was on Joseph's life, but because he needed to learn temperance, God allowed his brothers to sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. Though the situation looked bleak, God was with Joseph. He had him put in charge of the entire household of Potiphar, the Egyptian officer to whom he had been sold.

Soon Potiphar's wife began to flirt with Joseph. After he repeatedly rejected her, she accused Joseph of rape, and Potiphar had him put in prison.

Joseph had much to be bitter about. He had many offenders to forgive: his brothers, who sold him into slavery; Potiphar's wife, who lied about his actions; and God, who let it all happen.

After some time passed, Joseph had company in prison—Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. While there, each of them had a dream that Joseph offered to interpret.

Joseph accurately predicted that the baker would be hanged in three days and that the cupbearer would get his job back in the same span of time. But Joseph got too involved in his prophetic word and said: "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon" (Gen. 40:14-15, NIV).

Most of us would have done the same thing. But God had special plans for Joseph, and He did not want him to receive a promotion that could be explained in terms of what a human being could do.

Joseph needed to be delivered from bitterness and self-pity. First Corinthians 13:5, the same verse that says love “keeps no record of wrongs,” also says that love “is not self-seeking.”

If we are walking in love, we will not play the manipulator when it comes to promoting ourselves; we will let God promote us. Joseph was full of self-pity. He said: “I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon” (Gen. 40:15).

Self-pity and self-righteousness—twin sins that complement each other—are eclipsed when we begin to forgive totally and keep no record of wrongs. At this point, Joseph had not yet forgiven his brothers, Potiphar’s wife or God.

DREAMS DELAYED, NOT DENIED Joseph had not forgotten his dreams. He knew that one day his brothers would bow down before him; eventually, they did. And when they did, Joseph was a changed man. He had wonderfully forgiven them all.

What caused such a dramatic change in Joseph’s situation? Two years after Joseph had interpreted the dreams of the baker and the butler, Pharaoh himself had two dreams, and no one could figure them out. The cupbearer remembered Joseph and recommended him to Pharaoh.

Suddenly Joseph found himself before the ruler of Egypt, and he alone was able to interpret the dreams: There would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine in the land.

Joseph also offered his advice: Pharaoh should store up food during the first seven years so that there would be a surplus available during the seven years of lack—not only for Egypt

but also for the surrounding countries.

Pharaoh was so impressed with this wise advice that he made Joseph the prime minister of Egypt! God did it all. He had used the cupbearer, yes, but not because of Joseph's manipulation.

Then, during the time of famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt begging for food. He recognized them instantly, though they didn't know who he was.

When Joseph revealed his identity to them, he wept. Instead of punishing them, he demonstrated total forgiveness.

PRACTICE MAKES IT POSSIBLE Walking out the following principles is as near as you can come to exhibiting total forgiveness:

1. You will not let anyone know what someone said about you or did to you. Joseph did not want a single person in Egypt to know what his brothers had done to him.

The real reason we usually tell on other people is to make our offender look bad, to hurt his or her reputation. But God freely forgives all our sins and will never tell what He knows (see Eph. 4:32). That is the way Joseph forgave.

2. You will not allow anyone to be afraid of you or intimidated by you. Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers with tears and compassion. The last thing he wanted was for them to fear him.

When we have not totally forgiven those who hurt us, it gives us a bit of pleasure to realize that they are afraid or intimidated. We fancy they are getting a bit of punishment—which is what we want if we are not walking in forgiveness.

Joseph could have kept his brothers at a distance and made them fall at his feet in fear. But that is not what he did.

Neither did he require them to show how sorry they were before he forgave them.

This is the kind of relationship that Jesus desires with us. He wants to put us at ease in His presence because “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18).

3. We will want them to forgive themselves and not feel guilty. Joseph was trying to do what Jesus would do—make it easy for his brothers to forgive themselves.

To ease their minds, he gave an explanation for his suffering: “‘It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you'” (Gen. 45:5).

God does that with us as well. That is partly why He gave us what is possibly Paul’s most astonishing promise: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28, KJV).

The fact that all things work together for good doesn’t mean necessarily that they were right at the time. But God has a way of making bad things become good.

Total forgiveness means not wanting our offenders to feel guilty or upset with themselves for what they did. It also means showing them that there is a reason God let it happen.

4. We will let them save face. Joseph told his brothers something that was, without doubt, the most magnanimous, gracious and emancipating statement he had made so far: “You didn’t do this to me; God did” (see Gen. 45:7-8).

Joseph was literally saying, “Somebody had to go first, and I was chosen. God knew about the famine and that our family, the family of Israel, had to be preserved.”

He did not condemn them for what they did. He had come to understand the reason for their actions. For the one who

totally forgives from the heart, there is little self-righteousness.

When we are indignant about someone else's wickedness, there is the real possibility either that we are self-righteous or that we have no objectivity about ourselves. When we truly see ourselves as we are, we recognize that we are just as capable of committing sin as anyone else.

Joseph was not being condescending or patronizing. He had already forgiven his brothers during those years in the dungeon when God operated on his heart.

Letting his brothers save face was more than a polite gesture. Joseph was telling his brothers the truth. God had meant it for good; He did send Joseph to Egypt with a purpose in mind.

5. We will protect them from their greatest fear. The 11 brothers were no doubt thrilled when Joseph revealed his identity and expressed his forgiveness. But now they faced the greatest fear of all: They would have to return to Canaan and tell their father the truth of what they did.

Joseph knew that his forgiveness of what they had done was utterly worthless to them if they had to tell the whole truth to their father. He told them exactly what to say and what not to say to Jacob (see Gen. 45:9-3). His direction was worded carefully, and it told their father all the truth he needed to know.

You should not involve an innocent person by unloading information on him that he can easily live without. When I consider the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ knows all about my sin but promises to keep what He has forgiven a carefully guarded secret, it increases my gratitude to Him.

To hold another person in perpetual fear by threatening, "I'll tell on you," will quickly bring down the wrath of God on us. Pondering the sins of which I have been forgiven is enough to

shut my mouth for the rest of my life.

6. We will pray for them to be blessed. Total forgiveness involves praying for God's blessings to rain on the lives of your offenders. It means to pray that God will show favor to them rather than punish them and that they will prosper in every way.

In other words, pray that they will be dealt with as you want God to deal with you. Pray that He gives them total forgiveness just as you want Him to give it to you.

7. We will make forgiveness a lifelong commitment. Seventeen years after reuniting with his long-lost son, Jacob died.

Joseph's brothers were terrified that Joseph would at long last take revenge on them (see Gen. 50:15). But Joseph's change of heart was no passing thing.

In my own case the temptation to return to bitterness was very real. The thought that the people who hurt me were getting away with it would agitate me. But total forgiveness must go on and on and on.

I must never tell what I know, cause my offenders to feel fear, make them feel guilty, hope they will lose face or reveal their most devastating secrets. And I must keep this up as long as I live.

If you are prepared to make a covenant to forgive totally, you must realize you will have to renew that covenant tomorrow. And it may be even harder than it is today.

Forgiving our enemies is a lifetime commitment. But it is possible with God's help. In forgiving, we are blessed, and those who totally forgive are blessed the most. *

Read a companion devotional.

R.T. Kendall is the author of Total Forgiveness (Charisma House), from which this article is adapted.