

SESSION 5

OVERCOME BITTERNESS



How would you describe the taste of bitterness?

THE POINT

Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It has been said that harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. But let's admit it: forgiving another person can be hard. Really hard.

During a routine sweep of Central Park, NYPD officer, Steven McDonald, was shot in the back of the head three times by a 15-year-old kid. Because of that one momentary act of violence, Steven has spent the last 28 years confined to a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. Since that day, he has been extremely limited in what he can do. He hasn't held his wife in two decades. He has never held or played catch with his son, who was born just a few months after the accident. But Steven has done one thing.

He forgave the young man who shot him. "I forgave Shavod because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended my injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It's bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury. . . . I have come to realize that anger is a wasted emotion."

In our study of the life of Joseph, we've seen a man who had every reason to feel hurt, angry, and bitter, but he too chose forgiveness.

Research shows that bitter people have higher blood pressure and heart rate and are more likely to die of heart disease and other illnesses.¹

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Genesis 45:3-11

³ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But they could not answer him because they were terrified in his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please, come near me,” and they came near. “I am Joseph, your brother,” he said, “the one you sold into Egypt.

⁵ And now don’t be worried or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.

⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting.

⁷ God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

⁸ Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

⁹ “Return quickly to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: “God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me without delay.

¹⁰ You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near me—you, your children, and grandchildren, your sheep, cattle, and all you have.

¹¹ There I will sustain you, for there will be five more years of famine. Otherwise, you, your household, and everything you have will become destitute.”



The Setting

The famine was widespread. Joseph’s father heard Egypt had food and sent his remaining sons to purchase some. Joseph recognized his brothers when they came, though they did not recognize him. After a series of tests, Joseph eventually revealed his identity to them, stressed God had placed him there to keep them alive, and urged them to move the whole clan to Egypt so he could better provide for them during the remainder of the famine.



GENESIS 45:3-4

The famine God had revealed to Pharaoh affected the whole region. But because Pharaoh was willing to heed the warning of the dream, he took steps so that the country would not be totally ruined by the famine (Gen. 41:36). Egypt took seven years of abundance and earmarked some of it to get them through the seven years of famine.

Other areas of the world did not fare so well. Jacob and his family were among those who suffered, but they joined the nations coming to Egypt for grain. Genesis 42–44 tell us about the game Joseph played with his brothers, pretending to be harsh. It was only after Judah pleaded for Benjamin’s life (Gen. 44:18-34) that Joseph revealed who he was, allowing his brothers back into his world.

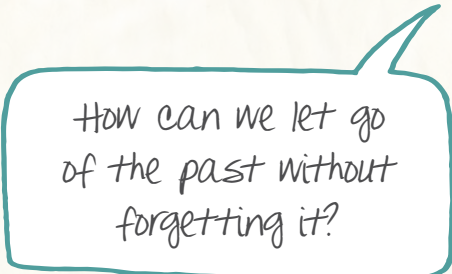
“I am Joseph,” may not have been the most difficult words for Joseph to speak, but what happened afterward certainly could have gone differently. He could have followed his introduction by asking, “Hey, how do you like my coat now? Ever been in a pit? Let me introduce you to one,” based on the way his brothers had treated him years earlier. However after revealing his identity, he exposed his values and longing by asking if his father was still living.

What a moment for Joseph’s brothers! In an instant, they exchanged the weight of guilt and lies for a heart-stopping realization that the next few moments might be their last. But instead, Joseph invited them to come closer.

The brothers received an invitation to be restored in their relationship. The dreamer they had once despised so severely and had removed from their presence offered them a chance to come close again. They were given a second chance: the burden of their lies removed, the relationship repaired, forgiveness extended. Only Joseph had the power to make this happen.



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GENESIS 45:5-8

Joseph added one more amazing statement: It was all God's plan. Not only did Joseph's words imply his forgiveness, but they also allowed his brothers to see that they had all been instruments in God's plan.

Joseph had just heard Judah share their family history, and he may have been affected by the way Judah relayed the story. Maybe the weight of that decision and the accompanying guilt had aged or softened his older brother. Possibly Joseph saw the guilt on Judah's face or heard the shame in his voice.

The brothers had paid a high price all their lives for the awful thing they had done to their brother. But Joseph told them not to grieve or worry over what they had done.

Joseph gave his brothers permission to stand tall. Joseph said it was God and not his brothers who had sent him there to Egypt.

- ▶ **God brought a caravan by at just the right time (Gen. 37:25).**
- ▶ **God "introduced" Joseph to the baker and the cupbearer (Gen. 40:2-4).**
- ▶ **God sent the dreams to Pharaoh and gave Joseph the ability and the opportunity to interpret his dreams and offer a plan of action (Gen. 41:25-36).**

God is also at work in your life, even in difficult, trying circumstances. Consider that God may be using difficult situations—and difficult people—to bring you into a better place and a closer walk with Him. Don't hold those circumstances against the other people involved. Allow God to work through your heartfelt, honest words—words that could speak freedom and forgiveness.

Omission vs. Commission
When it comes to sin, there are sins we commit and then there is sin that is a result of our inaction—not doing what we should have done. Determine how the following could be sins of omission:

- ▶ Not sharing the gospel with a classmate.
- ▶ Not getting a good night's sleep before a big game, meet, or performance.
- ▶ Waiting until the last minute to study for the exam.

What makes it difficult to forgive someone?



In 2011, U.S. fire departments reported \$6.9 billion in direct damage.³

GENESIS 45:9-11

Restoration is an amazing thing. When you move into a restored home, it is like a brand-new house. Over time, you stop thinking about what it used to be like.

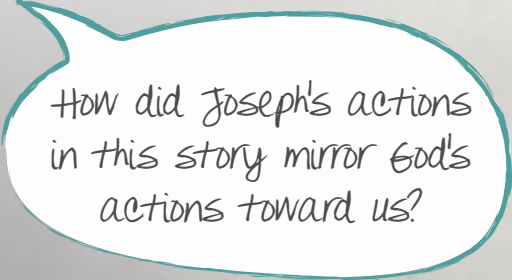
A friend who had a house fire told me about moving into their renovated home after insurance paid to fix the damages. They walked through the new front door onto the new ceramic tile to see new cabinets and plumbing, new lights, new closets, and a new fireplace with a beautiful new mantel. He told me later he could hardly remember what it looked like before the fire.

A restored home is nice, but a restored relationship is really amazing. When Joseph covered the relationship with his brothers in forgiveness, all of their lives had taken on a new color and a new texture. The doorway of resentment and hurt was pulled down and replaced with an entrance into love and concern. They started walking on a new foundation in their relationship that no longer was cracked, broken, or worn out from betrayal and lies; they walked on hope instead.

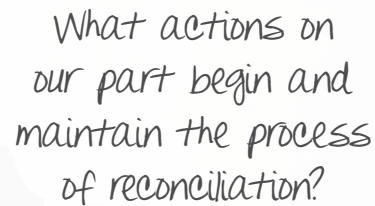
Joseph knew one man still was filled with mourning and sorrow: his father Jacob. Joseph directed his brothers to leave immediately and to tell their father the news. They were to tell the truth this time. Jacob's 13 years of grief would finally turn to joy; he surely would remember the dreams Joseph had as a teenager and realize they had come to pass.

The separation between Joseph and his family had been more than the distance between them. Their relationships had been broken. But Joseph wished for intimacy again. And just like in verse 4 when he asked his brothers to come closer, in verse 10 he emphasized his desire for family closeness again.

The space between them was removed with forgiveness.



How did Joseph's actions in this story mirror God's actions toward us?

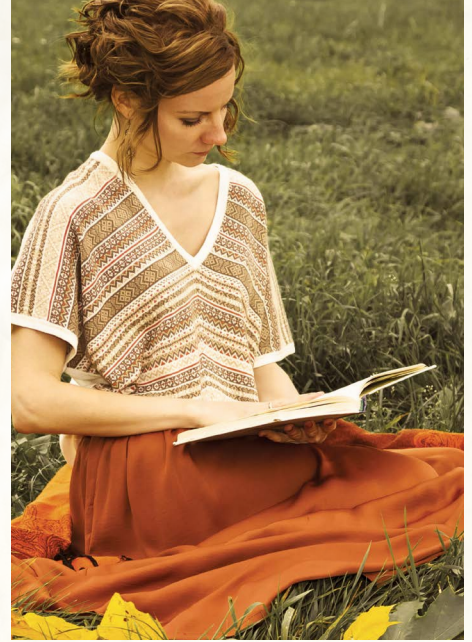


What actions on our part begin and maintain the process of reconciliation?



"Bitterness is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die!"¹⁴

—JOHN ORTBERG, JR.



APPLY IT

Where do you need to deal with the issue of forgiveness?

- ▶ **Identify your hurts.** Think through the pain points in your life where you have harbored unforgiveness. Ask God to give you understanding of your hurts from that situation, and ask Him to help you forgive even as He has forgiven you.
- ▶ **Seek forgiveness.** If others may be harboring unforgiveness toward you, seek them out and ask for forgiveness. Ask God for strength, graciousness, and love as you talk to them.
- ▶ **Encourage others.** If you know of people who have broken relationships, prayerfully go to them and encourage them to pursue forgiveness. Let them know you will walk with them through the process if they need a friend.

From Forgiveness to Forgiveness

Receiving God's forgiveness should motivate us to extend forgiveness to others.



To read the Essential Connection student devotion, "From

Forgiveness to Forgiveness," visit BibleStudiesForLife.com/articles or scan this QR code.

SEEK FORGIVENESS

Matthew 5:23-24

We've all been in situations where we did or said something that hurt someone else. Whether intentionally or not, our words and actions can cause tension in our relationships. Asking for forgiveness is not easy, but it is essential for healthy and God-honoring relationships. Consider if there is anyone in your life from whom you need seek forgiveness. Ask God for the grace, humility, and courage to pursue restoration with that person. In the space below, jot down what you want to say to him or her.



FORGIVEN

Ephesians 1:7-8

In the space below, write the word "forgiveness." For one minute, sit and reflect about what that word means. Recognize the magnitude of what God's forgiveness means for you. For those who are in Christ, forgiveness is certain, complete, and eternal. Spend some time thanking God for the gift of His infinite grace.



A tip:

- ▶ *Find a song that speaks to the power of forgiveness. Listen to it several times this week.*

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