

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You came amongst Your own people and taught them about the truth of God and His love; You also demonstrated the Father's love in Your life and death. May we always learn from Your teaching and hold firm to Your love, in the sure and certain knowledge that what You have done for us is dependable and secure forever. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Church Triumphant

Give thanks to God today for the early Christian leaders who laid the foundations of the Church which we inherit. Their work survives in the form of Creeds (such as the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed) which are used in churches today and have been a firm doctrinal rock for God's people for centuries. In your prayers, pray that they be understood and used today.

Meditation

(Encouragement)

There is no life essentially better than yours

For the Lord to use for His will:

There is no time that will prove to be better than now

For deciding to do the Lord's will:

There is no place better than the place where you are

For beginning to walk the Lord's ways:

There are no circumstances better than yours

For the Lord to start a new work:

There is no greater potential in anyone else

For the Lord to prefer them, not you;

There is nothing greater than what you do for your Lord

For His glory will be found through you.

Alleluia!

Bible Study - Genesis 50:14-26

¹⁴ After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt together with his brothers and all who had travelled with him for his father's burial. ¹⁵ Because their father was dead, Joseph's brothers thought, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and attempts to pay us back for all the wrongs we did to him?' ¹⁶ So they sent Joseph a statement which said: 'Before he died, your father gave this instruction, ¹⁷ "Now you must say to Joseph: I urge you to forgive your brother's rebellion and the wrong they did to harm you." Therefore, please forgive the evils the servants of the God of your father have committed.' When they said this to him, Joseph broke into tears. ¹⁸ Then his brothers came and fell down before him, and said, "Look, we are your slaves." ¹⁹ But Joseph replied to them, 'Don't be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you meant to harm me, God intended it for good, so that he can do what He is now doing, which it to save many people. ²¹ So have no fear; I will provide for you and your little ones myself.' In this way he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

²² So Joseph remained in Egypt together with his father's household. Joseph lived to the age of 110 years. ²³ He lived to see Ephraim's children to the third generation; and the children of Manasseh's son Machir were also born on Joseph's knees. ²⁴ Joseph said to his brothers, 'I will die one day; but God will surely come to your aid and deliver you from this land into the land he promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' ²⁵ Joseph made the Israelites swear this oath, 'When God

*comes to your help, you will take my bones from here.'*²⁶ Joseph died at the age of 110 years. He was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Review

These verses conclude Genesis, the first book of the Bible. On the one hand, they conclude the story of Joseph, describing the true reconciliation of all the brothers and the death of Joseph in Egypt. On the other hand, they complete the remarkable story of Genesis which begins with Creation and the tragic story of Adam and Eve, and ends with a unified and Covenant 'People of God' living at peace in Egypt and awaiting the call of God to return to the land He has promised them through their forefathers. It is a story which points onwards to what comes next, which is a characteristic of most books of the Bible, indeed of the whole Bible itself. Genesis points towards the great story of the Exodus, which defines the nation of Israel and their worship of God; the Old Testament points to the new; and the whole Bible points to the second, final coming of Christ when all Creation will be re-made according to the Glory of God.

The first part of our reading today tells us of the anxiety of the sons of Jacob following everything that had happened. They were justified in their concerns. They had seen the close relationship between Joseph and Jacob broken by the death of their father. However, apart from Judah, the blessings they had received from their father before he died were generally not favourable (Genesis 49). They were concerned to know whether their brother Joseph retained hurts from the past as their father had clearly done (e.g. see 49:4). For this reason they sent a message to their eminent younger brother suggesting that before he died, Jacob commanded that Joseph forgive them the wrongs they had done to him in his youth by selling him into slavery (50:16,17). The story in Genesis hints that the brothers made up this request; but they did not need to be so afraid. Joseph had moved on and was at peace with himself and his brothers about all that had happened between them.

Verses 19 to 21 are rightly regarded as some of the most powerful in the Old Testament, for they speak in a profoundly direct way about forgiveness; and in this way, they anticipate the Gospel itself and the forgiveness of God. After weeping at the suggestion that he might not have forgiven the brothers, Joseph honoured God as the One whose hand had guided everything including the circumstances that had led the family to be at peace; he refused to let his brothers think of him as acting 'in the place of God' (50:19). Joseph then spoke about how God's hand had turned evil into good for the salvation of people; a marvellous statement about God's authority and power which rivals some of Paul's great words of comfort (50:20 – see Romans 8:28). Finally, Joseph demonstrated that his own personal intent was pure by guaranteeing his kindness and protection for the brothers, given that he had the power to do this because of his position in Egypt (50:21).

When Joseph came to die, there was to be no great funeral procession back to Canaan as there was for his father Jacob (50:7-13). God's people had settled over many generations in Goshen (in the north of Egypt) and they awaited God's call to return to their Promised Land. Joseph made this clear by giving a strong personal commitment to his family (50:23) as he grew older, and he also told his family that when the time came to return to Canaan, his bones should be taken back there (50:25). For this reason, he was embalmed in the Egyptian manner and placed in a coffin, with the implication that he and all God's people awaited God's word for the return journey. It would come, but not in the way expected, as the book of Exodus tells us!

To live by forgiving the wrongs of the past and with a keen anticipation for what the Lord will do in the future, however, is a good place for any of God's people to be; even in our own times!

Going Deeper

This wonderful ending to Genesis has been treasured by Christians for centuries because of its description of forgiveness; this is close to the forgiveness taught by Jesus and shown by Him on the Cross. In addition, the request for forgiveness in verse 17 is a powerful general description of confession, from which we can learn. The details of these parts of the text yield helpful insights as we look at them further.

The brothers request forgiveness

It is strange to think that the request of the brothers for forgiveness might have been 'made up'; but the passage goes into some detail about how they realised their position might be vulnerable even before they presented their message 'apparently' from Jacob to Joseph, and is careful to indicate that the message to Joseph came out of their personal concerns (50:15,16).

They had good reason to be afraid because their brother remained the most powerful person in Egypt under Pharaoh. Without their father around, Joseph could have his brothers disposed of, and few would have asked any questions. The request they put to Joseph, whether 'made up' or originally from Jacob, contains some classic Old Testament words which define 'sin', and therefore deserves some study.

What Jacob is purported to have said is 'I urge you to forgive your brother's rebellion ...' (50:17). The word in Hebrew for 'rebellion' ('pasha') indicates the brother's wilfully going against what they knew to be right and good. This was their sin when they decided together to do away with their pretentious young brother in Genesis 37, but it is also the sin which is most contrary to God's will because rejection of what is good and right is rejection of God Himself. The confession went on; '... and the wrong they did to harm you' (50:17). Here, the Hebrew word used ('hattath') describes 'missing the mark' in the sense of failing to do what is right despite good intentions. This applied, for example, to Reuben's failed attempt to rescue Joseph (37:21f.). Finally, the confession said; 'please forgive the evils the servants of the God of your father have committed' (50:17). Here, the Hebrew word used ('ra'ah') indicates specific acts of evil or wrongdoing rather than general attitude or failure. Each of the brothers had done things of which they were ashamed, and they sought forgiveness for their 'sins'.

Each of the Hebrew words used in this passage are essential to our understanding of the nature of 'sin' in the Old Testament. Each word can be translated as 'sin' or any number of other related words. Your own Bible will probably have quite different translations for this verse, but the translation I have given helps us understand the full range of sin that was confessed, and for which forgiveness was sought. The brothers confessed all, and needed complete forgiveness.

The forgiveness of Joseph

Joseph's first response to this appeal was to weep (50:17). It is clear that Joseph felt that all he had done for his family was evidence of his forgiveness, despite the close relationship he had with his father. However, if his brothers needed re-assurance to complete their own sense of forgiveness, then Joseph was not a man to be insensitive to their needs.

Just as the confession of the brothers is like an essay which helps us understand sin, Joseph's response is like an essay which helps us understand forgiveness in all its fullness. Ultimately, it is God who is the guardian of our souls, and God who needs to forgive us when we know that we have sinned; so Joseph was correct when he responded to his brothers 'am I in the place of God?' (50:19). In this way, he told the brothers that he was no threat to them because he bore no grudge against them. This is the true starting place for all forgiveness, where the hurts of the past have been dealt with by God, and love can restore relationships.

The second great principle of forgiveness in this passage is explained in verse 20. When we place ourselves in the hands of God Almighty, we trust in His providence, and He alone is able to make good out of the evil circumstances in which we find ourselves; for whatever reason. This is a fundamental principle of the whole Bible which finds its climax in Jesus' death on the Cross; an act of profound evil which God transformed into the salvation of souls. Many Christian preachers have pointed out that even this verse in Genesis includes a reference to God's saving of souls by His providential work in love and forgiveness (see the words 'to save many people' in verse 20).

Joseph's final commitment was to continue to do what he had been doing for a long time, which was to provide for his extended family living in Goshen (50:21). It is noticeable that in this verse, the Hebrew word for 'I' is emphasised, showing the strength of Joseph's promise. The whole verse is then concluded by words of reassurance and 'kindness'; this is an expression which reads literally (in Hebrew) 'speaking to their hearts'. Joseph therefore appealed to his brothers to trust his words. There was no malice in him and he had no intention of seeking revenge.

The death of Joseph

Joseph's death is presented to us in a slightly formal way, but it is also a touching memorial to a man whose life had been an amazing tale of extremes; from favouritism to slavery, imprisonment and eventually a stunning rise to glory and fame. This is celebrated in the text by the notable age of 110 years at death. There are numerous ancient texts which tell us that at the time of Joseph's death in Egypt, this age was considered to be the optimum age for the death of a 'good' man, and however we wish to interpret the numbers and figures of the text, this age is genuinely significant.

Certainly, Joseph lived to secure the heritage of his father. He did not seek to follow in his father's footsteps, but to guide the people to listen to God, saying that the people should return to Canaan when 'God will surely come to your aid and deliver you from this land ...' These words were Joseph's dying legacy to his family; but Joseph was not a 'forefather' in the sense of 'Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' for although he had saved his family, he had not borne the Covenant of God with sole responsibility. That was now the property of all the clans (later tribes) of Israel, represented by his brothers and his children (Ephraim and Manasseh – see Gen 48:1f.). His words did not have the force of his own father or forefathers, but they were prophetic of all that was to come.

Application

It is very important that God's people, even today, understand what the Bible says about the nature of sin and forgiveness. Just as 'rebellion', 'waywardness' and 'evil' are all aspects of sin which need to be forgiven, so we also need to learn how forgiveness works. In this passage, we learn about this through Joseph's words which point to God, His providence and ability to make good out of all evil; and we also learn that people need to hear from us that they are forgiven. It is possible for us to think of sin and forgiveness too lightly, for they lie at the heart of Christian faith, and at the heart of our on-going discipleship. Whilst we continue to live on this earth, sin will show itself in and around us in all its forms, and we need to be constantly awake to its dangers. We also have a duty to be God's forgiving people, who are always prepared to forgive, no matter what the cost. Jesus did this, and we follow Him.

At the conclusion of the book of Genesis, we find that one quarter of it is about Creation and the beginnings of life on earth (Gen 1-11); one quarter is about the life of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 12-25), one quarter is about the life of Jacob (Gen 26-36) and one quarter about the life of Joseph, overlapping with Jacob (Gen 37-50). The division of this is not exact and there are some stories added into the overall sequence (such as Genesis 38) which appear to upset the balance, but this helps us find our way around a book which remains the story of the beginnings of the world and of God's Covenant people.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you believe that the Scripture records Jacob's request to Joseph (verse 17) or a request made up by the brothers for their own protection?
2. What can you learn about sin in this passage of Scripture, and what have you learned about it which is new?
3. What can you learn about forgiveness in this passage of Scripture, and what have you learned about it which is new?

Discipleship

Forgiveness is a hard issue to deal with. Many people find it almost impossible to forgive people who have hurt them because they feel that to forgive someone condones their actions. This is not true, but is a deception used by Satan to try and keep us, even God's people, away from our true call, which is to forgive others just as Jesus did. By forgiving, we set ourselves and others free; but we never condone the sin. Whilst we may forgive because Christ enables us to do so, another individual can only receive forgiveness if they confess, and those who have sinned but do not confess to others or to God have to live with the eternal consequences of their choice! We, who follow Christ by confessing sin and forgiving others, however, may be free!

Final Prayer

Lord God; You have forgiven the entire human race for the death of Your Son Jesus Christ, and You long for people to confess their sins so that they may receive Your forgiveness. May we not be so blind as to fail to forgive others; and may we be like You, showing love to all whether they receive it or not. Strengthen us in this call we pray; AMEN.