

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

February 9-15, 2020

Sermon Series: Forgive/Forgiven

Week Two: “Forgiving Family”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, who sent Jesus to suffer and die for our sake, help us to count the cost of ministry and by Your grace to follow through suffering to joy and through death to resurrection. Through Christ our Lord, we pray, Amen.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

Do we forgive them if they have not repented? There are two senses of forgiveness. There is the internal letting go of the right to retaliation, giving up bitterness and resentment. And there is extending mercy to the other, so that they know you have released them from the guilt of their sin towards you. We call this showing mercy towards them. We must forgive in the first sense. We cannot let the wrong continue to have control over us. But when it comes to showing mercy towards the other, we are not required to do this until they have repented. In fact, sometimes showing mercy towards one who has not repented can keep them from redemption Mercy extended prematurely might actually harm the one you’re extending it to. It can make you an enabler of their actions if you extend mercy too quickly.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Genesis 50:15-21 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What precipitates Joseph’s brothers’ concern? (50:15)

What feelings are they assuming Joseph has, and what do they expect Joseph to do? (50:15)

With what story do Joseph’s brothers decide to approach Joseph? (50:16-17)

How does Joseph respond to their story? (50:17)

With what attitude do Joseph's brothers approach Joseph after Joseph's response? (50:18)

What does Joseph say to allay his brothers' fears? (50:19)

How does Joseph interpret the brothers' original actions? (50:20)

What reassurance does Joseph give his brothers? (50:21)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged.

Why does the father's death create a crisis for Joseph's brothers? Why are they concerned Joseph will behave differently now that their father is dead?

Do you think the brothers are inventing the story about their father's words? What leads you to your conclusion? Note that no previous story in Genesis describes Jacob giving these instructions, but there ARE other references made to earlier occurrences that similarly are not recorded (see 50:5, for example).

What makes Joseph cry in the story? What makes the brothers cry?

Do you believe the brothers have repented of their past sin?

Why do Joseph and his brothers have different perspectives on how to respond to the past events? What worldview is represented by the brothers that leads to their anticipation of how Joseph will behave? What worldview is represented by Joseph's actual response?

Do you think their history will continue to impact the relationship between Joseph and his brothers going forward? Where might difficulties arise? Who do you think would be more anxious about the ongoing relationship, Joseph or his brothers?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

Read also: Genesis 37:1-36

The book of Genesis is 50 chapters long. Within that narrative, all of chapters 37 through 50, just over a fourth of the book, is the story of Joseph. The length of the story makes it distinct from all other stories in Genesis – it is, essentially, a “novella” of its own, set within the broader patriarchal history of Israel that makes up the rest of Genesis. Previously, in Genesis, as a rule, each chapter related an independent story of its own. Now, to conclude the book, we have a sweeping narrative with its own plot development, characters, settings, introduction, climax, and conclusion.

While this week's lesson contains the decisive theological point of the entire Joseph story, a general overview of the “novella” is necessary to fully grasp the concluding scene that is the subject of this

week's lesson. Joseph was the second-youngest son of the twelve sons of Jacob, who became the patriarchs of the "twelve tribes of Israel." These twelve sons were borne by four different women – two of Jacob's wives and two of Jacob's concubines. Joseph was the firstborn son of the woman Jacob truly loved – Rachel. This made Joseph Jacob's favorite, and his brothers knew it. In his youth, Joseph had dreams of his parents and brothers bowing down before him, and he told the dreams to them. In their jealousy, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery and told their father he had been killed by a wild animal (Genesis 37). Joseph ends up as the servant of an Egyptian leader, but is wrongfully accused of adultery with the leader's wife, and imprisoned. While in prison, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams becomes known, and when he accurately interprets the Egyptian Pharaoh's dreams, he becomes his protégé. Joseph's status in Egypt continues to rise, until he is "second only to Pharaoh." Meanwhile, famine strikes his homeland in Canaan. His brothers, unknowingly, approach Joseph for aid, and after several intrigues, Joseph moves his brothers and father to Canaan where they can thrive under his leadership.

Now, though, picking up with this week's reading, Jacob, the father, has died. This death clearly aroused anxiety in the brothers. Maybe Joseph had only been kind to the family out of respect for his father Jacob. Maybe he's even been holding out for this moment, waiting to finally achieve his retribution for his brothers' actions until Jacob's death. The story shows us that the brothers' conscience has been uneasy this whole time – their guilt in selling Joseph into slavery has not actually been dealt with yet. Out of their anxiety, rather than go to Joseph, they send word that Jacob had instructed them to tell Joseph that Jacob himself wanted Joseph to forgive them for their sin against him. Joseph's only response to this news is to break down in tears. From ancient times, some commentators have considered the possibility that this appeal is itself a lie, or an invention, as if the brothers are merely acting out of fear to save their own skins. There is no clear reason to believe this; however, as the humility the brothers exhibit when they do finally approach Joseph in person would suggest their sincerity.

News of Joseph's reaction must have reached the brothers, because it gives them the courage to approach Joseph in person. In this scene, they too break down in tears, but fall on their knees before him – fulfilling the details of the dream Joseph had as a youth (see Genesis 37:6). It is Joseph's personal response in verses 19 and 20 that contain the theological core of the story. Joseph defines his own relationship to God, as well as his brothers' relationship to God. Joseph's question, "Am I in the place of God?" is not simply a question of "jurisdiction," as if Joseph has no stake in the matter and it is God alone who can judge the brothers. If that were the case, the brothers would receive no comfort from Joseph's response – the question of guilt would simply be moved to a "higher court"! Rather, what Joseph is claiming is that God Himself has clearly ALREADY passed judgment in this case, by saving so many people through Joseph's management in Egypt. In fact, the brothers themselves are included in God's saving activity in the story – their families are among the "many" whose lives were saved through the events of the story! If Joseph were to condemn them now, when God has saved them from death by famine, it would truly be as if Joseph had put himself "in the place of God," undoing what God had done. The brothers are so loved by God, that God has saved them, underscoring the relationship between these "sinners" and a loving God. At the same time, Joseph understands his own relationship to this loving God so clearly, that he refuses to act toward his brothers in a way contrary to how God has acted toward them. To do so would be to set himself above God.

This is the core meaning of the story. Joseph is able to forgive his brothers, and promise to care for them and their children, because he sees that the heart of God is for their salvation. To fail to forgive

those whom God had already forgiven (as demonstrated by their salvation), would be inconceivable for David, who has, throughout the narrative, been portrayed as deeply in touch with the heart of God. God's love, and therefore Joseph's love, surpasses the brothers' hate. It was not, ultimately, their hate that brought Joseph to Egypt, but God's love. Regardless of the visible circumstances, Joseph understands that through God's mysterious movements, in the end, he went to Egypt to accomplish God's desire to preserve life – to save.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Consider your own family relationships. Are there relationships in your life where you are holding a grudge after many, many years? If so, do you think that person knows you are holding the grudge? Who, today, is suffering more with regard to the broken relationship?

Would it make a difference if the person you are holding a grudge against came to you seeking forgiveness?

The sermon theme mentions two senses of "forgiveness." How is the forgiveness of giving up personal bitterness and resentment different from the forgiveness of releasing someone who has repented from their guilt? Who benefits from the first kind of forgiveness? Who benefits from the second? Would already having accomplished the first make it easier to extend the second? What if someone does repent of their sin to you - would offering the second kind of forgiveness impact your ability to offer the first?

Do you find it more, or less, difficult to extend forgiveness to family relatives as compared to other relationships? What changes the dynamic of forgiveness within families?

How does your personal relationship with God affect your ability to forgive? Would gaining the knowledge that someone has confessed their sin to God, and been forgiven, impact your own willingness to forgive? What does the Joseph story have to say about that?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we need Your help to forgive. As we gain a better understanding of forgiveness, teach us to forgive from our hearts. Remind us that even though we have been sinned against, we too have sinned against others. Give us a strong sense of Your forgiveness of us, so that we might forgive others as well. We ask You, Lord, for forgiveness for the times we have hurt others, even within our own families, and for the courage and strength to heal those relationships. And we ask You to help us to let go of bitterness and the urge to retaliate, so that we can know the peace of forgiveness ourselves. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, through whom forgiveness and healing is made possible. Amen.