

# Forgiveness: Breaking the Power of the Past



Kay Arthur, David & BJ Lawson

**4**minute  
BIBLE STUDIES

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P R E S S

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# FORGIVENESS: BREAKING THE POWER OF THE PAST

Outside, winter pierced the day with a frigid, blustery chill; inside, a similar iciness permeated the church. Among the people gathered for the funeral, twenty family members sat scattered in eighteen pews. Snippets of conversations drifted back as I waited for the service to begin.

“Poor old soul lived alone. It was such a shame that John didn’t visit his mother more than a couple of times a year.”

“Did Aunt Marilyn talk to you?” “No, and I’m not talking to her until she talks to me!”

“Why didn’t Rita come to the funeral?” “She got mad at Mother’s funeral and hasn’t talked to any of the family since.”

What happened to create such division within this

family that even at a loved one's funeral they sat apart from one another and talked among themselves about other family members who weren't there?

Sadly, dysfunctional families are nothing new and hardly unusual. Dating back to the days of Cain and Abel, lack of forgiveness has destroyed countless relationships. And although our deepest hurts may come from family, forgiveness isn't simply a *family* issue; forgiveness is a *people* issue. In every relationship it's certain we'll need to extend or seek forgiveness at some point.

So this subject of forgiveness touches us all and brings to mind many questions, including...

*How can I forgive when the pain is so great?*

*What about revenge? Is the other person going to get away with what they did?*

*What if I choose not to forgive?*

*Can I be forgiven of my past mistakes?*

*Does forgiving mean I have to forget the past?*

For the next six weeks we'll look to the Bible for the answers to these questions and others. You'll learn how forgiveness not only cleanses your soul and frees your mind but also unlocks the chains that hold you captive to the person who wronged you.

Through this study you'll learn how to unleash the power of forgiveness in your life, letting it propel you out of painful and awkward situations and freeing you from the pain of the past.

## WEEK ONE

Have you suffered pain at the hands of another person? Have you wondered if you could ever get past it?

This week we're going to look at the life of Joseph, a young man from a blended family who was horribly mistreated yet somehow broke the power of his painful past in order to walk in freedom. Let's see what we can learn from this story of pain, disappointment, and forgiveness.

### OBSERVE

*Leader:* Read Genesis 37:1–4. Have the group say aloud and...

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- circle every reference to **his brothers**, including synonyms and pronouns.

*As you read the text, it's helpful to have the group say the key words aloud as they mark them. This way everyone will be sure to mark every occurrence of the word, including any synonymous words or phrases. Do this throughout the study.*

### DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking *Joseph*?

### GENESIS 37:1–4

<sup>1</sup> Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan.

<sup>2</sup> These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father.

3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.

4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

### GENESIS 37:5–11


5 Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

6 He said to them, “Please listen to this dream which I have had;

- What did you learn about Joseph’s relationship with his brothers? his father?

### OBSERVE

*Leader:* Read aloud Genesis 37:5–11 and have the group...

- circle every reference to **the brothers**, including pronouns.
- draw a cloud like this  around every occurrence of the word **dream**, including pronouns.



10 He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?”

11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

### GENESIS 37:18–28

18 When they [his brothers] saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.

19 They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer!

- How did his father respond to Joseph’s second dream?
- Compare the responses of his brothers and father in verse 11.

### OBSERVE

Jacob sent Joseph to check on the welfare of his brothers and the flocks in Shechem. Even though he knew they hated and envied him, Joseph obeyed his father’s commands.

*Leader: Read Genesis 37:18–28 aloud and have the group...*

- *circle every reference to **the brothers**, including pronouns and synonyms such as **one another**.*
- *underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.*

## DISCUSS

- What does this passage reveal about the relationships between various brothers and Joseph?

20 “Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, ‘A wild beast devoured him.’ Then let us see what will become of his dreams!”

21 But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, “Let us not take his life.”

22 Reuben further said to them, “Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

23 So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they

stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him;

**24** and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

**25** Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt.

**26** Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?

- How great had the brothers’ jealousy and hatred become, according to verse 18?

- As you read about the rejection and abuse Joseph suffered at the hands of his brothers, does this remind you of any similar situations of abuse, hatred, or jealousy? Do you know individuals who have been abused by their families? Discuss how it made them feel.

27 “Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him.

28 Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

## OBSERVE

*Leader:* Read Genesis 37:29–36. Have the group say aloud and...

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- circle every reference to **his brothers**, including pronouns.

## GENESIS 37:29–36

29 Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments.

**30** He returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?”

**31** So they took Joseph’s tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood;

**32** and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, “We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not.”

**33** Then he examined it and said, “It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!”

**34** So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sack-cloth on his loins and

## DISCUSS

- What did you learn about Reuben and the other brothers from this passage? What were they like? What were they doing?
- How was their father affected by their choices?

- What happened to Joseph?

- Parents often are hurt by their children's actions. Do you know parents who have been wounded by something their child did? Discuss the scenario.

mourned for his son many days.

**35** Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol [the grave] in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him.

**36** Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the body-guard.

**GENESIS 42:1–17**

<sup>1</sup> Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, “Why are you staring at one another?”

<sup>2</sup> He said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die.”

<sup>3</sup> Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, “I am afraid that harm may befall him.”

<sup>5</sup> So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those

**OBSERVE**

Some years after the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, he accurately interpreted Pharaoh’s dream to predict that Egypt would have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh promoted the one-time slave to be his second in command of all Egypt. During the plentiful years Joseph stored grain in great abundance. When the seven years of famine came, he opened the storehouse and sold grain to people from all over the face of the earth. This chain of events led to Joseph’s next encounter with his brothers, twenty-two years after they betrayed him.

**Leader:** Read Genesis 42:1–17 aloud and have the group...

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- circle every reference to **his brothers**, including pronouns and synonyms such as **sons of Israel**.

**DISCUSS**

- What did you learn from marking the references to Joseph's brothers?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What did they claim to be in verse 11? Are they?

who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also.

**6** Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.

**7** When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food."

**8** But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, “You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land.”

<sup>10</sup> Then they said to him, “No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food.

<sup>11</sup> “We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.”

<sup>12</sup> Yet he said to them, “No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!”

<sup>13</sup> But they said, “Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in

- What is so significant about this passage? What did the brothers do when they appeared before Joseph?

- What does this tell you about God? about Joseph’s dreams? Is this all coincidence, or is God at work? Discuss.

- How did Joseph treat his brothers? Why did he deal with them in this manner, and what was the result?

the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive.”

**14** Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you, you are spies;

**15** by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here!

**16** “Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.”

**17** So he put them all together in prison for three days.

**GENESIS 42:21–24**


21 Then they [the brothers] said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother [Joseph], because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.”

22 Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

23 They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them.

**OBSERVE**

**Leader:** Read Genesis 42:21–24 aloud and have the group...

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- circle every reference to **his brothers**, including pronouns.
- mark the word **sin** with a slash, like this: 

**DISCUSS**

- What new insight did you gain about how Joseph responded when his brothers threw him into the pit?
- Have you ever pleaded with someone to stop doing something wrong or hurtful? What happened?
- What did you learn from marking the references to the brothers in this passage?

- How did Joseph respond when he heard his brothers talking after they arrived in Egypt? What does this reveal about him?
- What does this passage tell you about the guilt of sin?

## OBSERVE

As the brothers left Egypt, leaving Simeon behind, Joseph had the money they'd paid hidden in their sacks of grain. This served as a test designed to break their hard hearts. The famine continued, and they returned to Egypt with Benjamin as Joseph had requested. Simeon was returned to them, they received more grain, and the brothers headed home. Benjamin was soon arrested for stealing a silver cup, hidden in his sack at Joseph's command, and they all had to return to the palace. This was yet another test to bring them to a point of brokenness. Judah interceded for the boy and offered himself in Benjamin's place, revealing a change in his heart and an indication of the brothers' repentance concerning Joseph.

24 He turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

## GENESIS 45:1–15

1 Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

2 He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it.

3 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am

Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 “For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

**Leader:** Read Genesis 45:1–15 aloud. Have the group...

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- circle every reference to **his brothers**, including pronouns.

## DISCUSS

- Briefly summarize the events in this passage.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What did you learn from marking *Joseph*?

- Did Joseph ignore or deny his brothers' wrongdoing?
- How did Joseph deal with his brothers?
- What does this tell you about Joseph? about his belief in and relationship to God?

7 “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

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

9 “Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.

10 “You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s

children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have.

11 “There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished.”

12 “Behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth which is speaking to you.

13 “Now you must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and all that you have seen; and you must hurry and bring my father down here.”

- Did Joseph wait for his brothers to ask for forgiveness before he gave it? What lessons do you find here for our own behavior? Discuss your answer.

- Instead of harboring bitterness or returning hatred for hatred, Joseph looked beyond his brothers to see the hand of God. We often interpret our tragedies as injustices or punishments for unknown

faults. But we need to understand that God sometimes leads His children into suffering so that He might bring out of that suffering some greater good. Can you think of a time when you've seen God work this way?

***Leader:** If time allows, invite someone in the group to share a personal experience of seeing God bring good out of suffering.*

## OBSERVE

The family accepted Joseph's invitation and moved to Egypt to live under his generous care. But Jacob's death several years later prompted fresh concern among Joseph's brothers. Let's look at their conversation.

***Leader:** Read aloud Genesis 50:15–21. Have the group...*

- underline every reference to **Joseph**, including pronouns.
- mark each occurrence of the word **forgive** with a big **X**.

<sup>14</sup> Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck.

<sup>15</sup> He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him.

## GENESIS 50:15–21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"

<sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying,

17 “Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

18 Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place?”

20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for

## DISCUSS

- Now that their father was dead, what was the brothers’ concern? Did it seem to be warranted? Explain your answer.
- Is this the first record of the brothers’ confession of their sin?
- What is confirmed about Joseph in this passage?
- Do you see any possible connection between verses 15 and 19? Who can rightfully judge and punish sin?

- What shows that Joseph truly forgave his brothers?
  
- Romans 15:4 tells us that the Old Testament was written for our instruction and to give us encouragement and hope. What did you learn from Joseph's life that can help you?

good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

21 "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

## WRAP IT UP

As believers we can refuse to allow the past to determine our future. Everything you have endured, suffered, and experienced can have eternal value if you choose to view it from God's perspective.

Joseph's life clearly demonstrates this principle. He suffered a terrible crime at the hand of his brothers, who initially schemed to kill him before selling him into slavery. Yet Joseph did not hold it against them. Instead, years later when famine drove the brothers to Egypt in search of food, Joseph recognized them and felt compassion for them before they knew who he was. He forgave them unconditionally—not dependent on any show of remorse from them. In fact, although they were humble before Joseph, they never specifically asked forgiveness from him. To be sure, they had mistreated him, but he chose to see the past from God's point of view. He recognized that God was working His good in Joseph's life through the very evil that had been done to him.

Joseph's example reminds us that when we don't know why certain things happen, we must remain confident that God is at work in every experience of our lives, even the painful ones. Instead of allowing his situation to paralyze him or render him ineffective, Joseph believed God had a plan for his life. By fulfilling that plan and looking ahead, he broke the power of the past—a past riddled with wounds inflicted by others.

What about you? Do you believe God has a plan and purpose for your life? Are you willing to do what it takes to break the power of the past and walk in freedom toward the future?



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