

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:15-21)

Guilt is a Heavy Burden

I once asked my catechism class, "What is your conscience?" A young girl blurted out, "That horrible voice!" That answer said a lot about how sensitive her conscience was and how easily she felt guilty. Would you share her definition? Whether we experience it as a voice or not, our conscience is a powerful thing – for some of us, maybe even a horrible thing. Most of the time, we think of its work in terms of guilt. Guilt is a very powerful feeling. It can destroy lives. It can drive people to drink and do drugs. It can destroy marriages and ruin relationships and end careers. So it's not surprising that guilt is a major theme of the Bible. This morning, at the very end of the book of Genesis, we see guilt in action. Whether you hear a voice calling you guilty or you just feel your guts tighten up and you wish you could forget certain memories forever, **guilt is a heavy burden.**

I.

Do you need that burden lifted off of you? Joseph's brothers certainly did. This was not the Joseph who was the stepfather of Jesus. This was his ancestor. This Joseph was one of twelve brothers, the sons of Jacob. He was the second youngest, but he was also his father's favorite. When Joseph was a teenager, he had a pretty big head about it. God began to send him visions about his future role as a ruler. Joseph rubbed those visions in his brothers' faces. Worse, his father would send him out into the fields where his brothers were working to spy and then tattle on them. Joseph's ten older brothers hated him. One day, when they were all alone in the fields, they grabbed him and threw him into a dry cistern. They were going to kill him, but just then they spotted a caravan of merchants, and they sold him into slavery. They led their father to believe that he had been killed by a wild animal and they went on with their lives.

Well, more than ten years passed. Joseph served as a slave in Egypt. He was falsely accused of a crime and spent a couple of years in prison. But then God did a miracle: he pulled Joseph out of prison and made him the prime minister of Egypt. In time, God sent a famine that drove Joseph's brothers to Egypt to buy food, but they didn't recognize him. Eventually, Joseph revealed himself and found out that his elderly father was still alive. He moved the whole family down to Egypt where he could provide for them, because God had revealed that the famine would last for five more years. The past seemed to be in the past and the family was reunited.

But then Joseph's father died. His brothers were terrified of what would happen next. You see, there was no one to protect them if Joseph, the real ruler of Egypt, decided that he was going to get even. Worse, they knew that they deserved it. They knew that what they had done was unforgiveable. But they also knew that they had to find some way to get their brother's forgiveness. So they sent a message to him in which they claimed that their father had left a last request that Joseph forgive his brothers. Joseph wept when he got that message. Then his brothers came in and threw themselves at his feet and waited to see what would happen.

What was the brothers' problem? It was guilt, wasn't it? Behind all their fear of what their brother was going to do lay a guilty conscience. What they did and said and felt rings true today, because we, too, experience guilt. And it's a complex set of feelings. Part of it is fear. Part of it is a desperate desire to avoid the consequences I know I deserve. It can lead to lies and self-destructive behavior and to just giving up, like the brothers did when they threw themselves at Joseph's feet. But at the same time, when the brothers sent the message asking Joseph to forgive them, they did a much better job of it than people do today. They didn't make any excuses. They didn't try to justify what they had done by pointing to Joseph's bad behavior. They didn't

use the apology formula we so often hear today, “If I hurt you, I’m sorry.” They didn’t blame anyone else. They simply humbled themselves and asked for forgiveness. And the Hebrew idiom for forgive is very telling. Literally, it means “to lift the sin off of someone.” That’s what they asked for.

That formula tells us something very important: there’s more to guilt than just feeling guilty. If that’s all there was to it, then we could do what so many people do to kill those feelings. We could drink or bury ourselves in our work or buy stuff we don’t need to distract ourselves and feel better. But first and foremost, guilt is a verdict. When you’re guilty, it means that you really committed the crime and you really deserve the punishment that goes with it. The brothers did not ask Joseph to make them feel better. They asked him to lift the sin and its consequences off of them. Guilt is indeed a burden. It’s a horrible emotional burden that can destroy our lives. But first and foremost, it’s a verdict that we deserve God’s punishment in hell forever. The impending doom of that punishment is what crushes our spirit and brings on all the emotion.

How many of us are carrying a burden like Joseph’s brothers? In the years that I’ve been a pastor, I’ve heard stories of terrible things that Christians have done to one another. Part of the damage those sins do is to the person who commits them. We’re guilty and that tortures us. It keeps us up nights and strangles the joy in our lives. It causes us to fear the consequences and to blame others and to engage in all kinds of self-destructive behavior. Guilt is a terrible burden to carry. How do we get rid of it? The real solution is not in our hands at all. Only another person can lift the burden off of you – the person that you hurt.

Joseph’s brothers did the right thing. They went to their brother and asked for his forgiveness. The key to restoring broken relationships is not an apology. “I’m sorry” just doesn’t go far enough. It is important to show that you’re sorry. But if you have wronged someone, you need to ask for forgiveness. You need to ask them to lift the sin off you. That’s what forgiveness means – giving up the right to extract vengeance from someone. And that gives healing to us who sinned. It may take some time for our hearts to completely heal. But the healing begins with forgiveness.

What if you can’t get forgiveness from the person you hurt? What if they refuse to give it? What if they can’t because they’re dead or you’re not allowed to talk to them anymore? How do we find peace then? Actually, in the same way we do when we can talk to someone, because even before we go to them for forgiveness we go to God. Every sin against anybody here is a sin against God. We’re sinning against God when we hurt our spouse or our children or our parents or our neighbors. Before we go to them for forgiveness, we need to go to God and ask him to lift the sin off our shoulders. Not just the feelings, but the very fact that we committed the sin. We need God to change the verdict in his courtroom from guilty to innocent.

He does that in Christ. Jesus lived in our place. He loved every human being, even his enemies. When God lifts our sin off us, he puts Jesus’ love in its place. Jesus death is what lifts that sin off of us because he was punished for every sin we ever commit against God and against every other human being here. He suffered the death and the hell that God’s verdict demands from us. Now, because of him, God has a different verdict for us: we are holy and innocent and loved. Then God speaks tenderly to us. He lifts the emotional burden off our hearts by assuring us over and over again that we are loved and forgiven and nothing can change that. That’s how he gives us the courage to go to those we have hurt and ask for their forgiveness.

He works in them, too. Most of the time, people expect an apology, an “I’m sorry.” Almost always, people are surprised by, “Will you forgive me?” Many times, that humble request enables them to give that forgiveness we so desperately need. When they refuse, or we can’t go to them, it is harder for us. When we’ve done something terrible, forgiveness might be hard for us to accept. Our hearts may condemn us over and over again. But even when the people we’ve hurt can’t or won’t forgive us, Christ already has. Come again and again to me, your pastor, and through me, to your Lord, and confess that sin and hear that Christ has taken it away. Let God lift that burden off your heart over and over again until it is truly healed.

II.

But maybe in your life, you’ve also been on Joseph’s side of the equation: you’ve been the one who was hurt. What should your attitude be? Doesn’t Joseph answer that question for us, too? **Guilt is a heavy burden. Do you need to lift that burden off of someone else?**

Joseph spent more than ten years separated from his family. He was enslaved and sold. He was falsely accused and imprisoned. People made promises to him and forgot them. We could understand if had held a grudge against those brothers who suddenly came to buy food. We could understand if he would’ve enslaved them. We could understand if he simply would’ve walked away and refused to reveal himself to them and let

them survive as best they could. We could understand if had had harsh words for them now that dad was dead and his brothers were at his mercy. But Joseph wept because his brothers were afraid and guilty. He had compassion on them because they were still tortured by their guilt and they didn't understand yet that he had already forgiven them.

When they came, he didn't say in so many words, "I forgive you." But what he said really meant the same thing. He said, "**Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?**" What did he mean by that? He had no right to vengeance. God is the judge. A Christian understands that our role in life is not to get our pound of flesh. How did Joseph know that? How can we? By understanding that we are sinners, too. Joseph knew that he needed God to lift his sin off his shoulders just as surely as his brothers did. Knowing that made him humble. Humility is the key to forgiveness. Sinful prides says, "You hurt me. Now I'm going to hurt you." Sinful pride says, "How dare you do that to me?" But faith and humility say, "Jesus died for my sins, too. Am I in the place of God?" And it forgives. It passes on any claim of vengeance. It has compassion. Joseph spoke tenderly to his brothers, the brothers who had done so much to hurt him, to help them heal. True forgiveness wants to heal even those who are hurting because they hurt us.

Humility then takes a wider view of things. Joseph could see that God had used all that sin to put him in charge of Egypt so that God could use him to save many lives during seven years of famine. That was far more important than how hard it was on Joseph to get there. God has a plan for our lives. We see that in Christ. Think of all the times he was unjustly attacked and criticized. Think of the horrors he suffered before and during his crucifixion. Was any of that fair? No. But he suffered it so that we will live. He suffered what our sins deserve so that God can lift our sin off us. God declares us not guilty because of him – not guilty even of that sinful pride that refuses to forgive. That was God's plan for us.

Jesus saw his suffering as a way to serve God and us. Joseph saw his suffering as part of God's plan for him and for many others. The God who sent his Son to die for us has a plan for our lives, too. And if that plan includes suffering something that just isn't fair, in fact, something sinful and cruel at the hand of someone else, God still knows what he is doing. He loves us and he will bring us home to heaven where he will make everything perfect for us. While we're here, trust him and forgive those who hurt you – lift their sin off their shoulders.

Guilt is a terrible burden to bear. Have compassion on those who bear it. Be quick to forgive those who have harmed you personally. Be quick to announce the forgiveness of Christ on those who are weighed down. Lift their burden. And when the burden is yours, go to Christ for forgiveness. Come and confess to me and let me lift your spiritual burden. Then in the power of the Holy Spirit, go and ask forgiveness of those you have hurt. Trust that God will heal you. Amen.