

# GROWING *Together*

## What the Bible Says about Forgiveness

Joseph's brothers were jealous. They didn't like the special treatment he received, including the coat of many colours given to their father's favourite son. They hated his heady dreams, which seemed to portray them bowing down before him. So they made a plan to kill him. In the end, they sold him into slavery and told their father he had been killed.

Years later, Joseph unexpectedly sees his brothers again. Only now he is a powerful official in the land of Egypt. In a time of famine, his family has come to purchase food. They do not recognize their long-forgotten brother. But Joseph recognizes them.

We wonder, how will Joseph respond? Now that the tables have been turned, will Joseph use his power to seek revenge on those who did him wrong? Will he demand justice? Will he help his long-lost family in their time of need? Will he choose to forgive?

The answer does not come immediately. But when it does, it is accompanied by tears. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and tells them not to be distressed. They will find a place of refuge in Egypt. Joseph's practice of forgiveness opens the door to new possibilities for all. (Gen. 37, 45)

In scripture, the need for forgiveness arises when there is a break in right relations with God and other people. The resulting alienation has practical consequences that affect every facet of our lives.

When God's name, or identity, was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, it was given as "the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ..." (Ex. 34:6-7a) The knowledge that God forgives came to be embedded in

Hebrew culture through an awareness of the covenant and the sacrifices offered in worship.

Although Jesus inherited from his people the knowledge of God's forgiveness, he intensified and extended its meaning. Imagine the surprise of the religious leaders when Jesus himself claimed authority to forgive sins apart from the established temple rituals. (Mk. 2:10)

Jesus taught that forgiveness received from God must be offered to others. In the Lord's Prayer, he instructs us to pray that God would "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." (Matt. 6:12) Forgiveness cannot be kept to ourselves.

Underlining this reciprocal relationship, Jesus summarized his teaching bluntly: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt. 6:14-15)

Not only did Jesus teach that we are obliged to forgive, but he challenged those who tried to put limits on the number of times forgiveness could be extended. "Not seven times," Jesus said, but "seventy-seven times!" (Matt. 18:21-22)



These are not easy teachings. But for Jesus, they were more than mere words. At the last supper, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. Lifting the cup, he acknowledged his impending death, and said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28) Later, at his crucifixion, he prayed that God would forgive the very ones who did him harm. (Lk. 23:34)

The biblical story of Joseph demonstrates how forgiveness can open a new way for humanity. As followers of Jesus, we are both forgiven and forgiving. Receiving this astonishing gift we, in turn, offer it to others.

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GROWING TOGETHER is a series of four monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

