

“You sold me, God sent me.”

## Joseph’s theology of forgiveness.

*For Our Good 5: Genesis 44.16-45.8*

### Intro

Many of you heard the news this Monday about an officer involved shooting there in Raleigh that fatally killed Akiel Denkins. Akiel was a young African American man and his death has brought the rift between law enforcement and the community, and the rift between races, to light right here in N.C. We wanted to take time today to pray for our church families in Raleigh who are trying to guide the community through this pain, to pray for Akiel’s family as they grieve, and to pray for God to allow the church to be the beacon of unity and peace found only in the gospel. We are praying as Mercy grows that it becomes a culturally diverse church because our city desperately needs that picture of the gospel. (POINTS FOR SCREEN)

- That churches (Summit, Vision, and Waypoint) would love the community well.

- That the Denkins family would find comfort and peace in the gospel
- That God would grow Mercy into a multicultural church for the sake of the gospel in Charlotte.

-----GROUP PRAYER TIME-----

Quick reminder coming out of that: Serve Charlotte is March 20. The way we engage hard issues like the ones we just prayed for is by modeling the unity found in the gospel...that’s why we desire to be a multicultural church. We also model it through serving our community. And that’s what we will be doing March 20. Sunday AM. You can Sign Up Today in the back for one of our 9 locations.

As a church we’ve been walking through the end of the book of Genesis over the course of 6 weeks. We are calling this 6 week series “for our good” because we are seeing how God works in our lives for our good even when we can’t see it. So if you have a bible get it out now and turn it over to Genesis 44. If you don’t have one or you forgot yours, we’ll have the words on the wall behind me. You can pick up a bible at the blue tent. Had a few people grab one last week and would love to give you one this week. That’s our gift to you.

Today we are focusing on the interaction between two brothers who have some history. We are going to see our main character Joseph reunited with the rest of his brothers. The spokesperson of the brothers is once

again...Judah. You remember Judah? Judah was the ring leader of the brothers when they sold Joseph into slavery back in Week 1 of our series. 22 years later, we are going to find Judah and Joseph again face to face. And the encounter is going to paint one of the best pictures of what true repentance and forgiveness really looks like. I think, if you let it, God can use today's passage as a breakthrough in some long held conflict in your life and create a new pattern in your relationships.

Now, we are going to pick up in Genesis 44.16. But I need to fill in some gaps from where we left off last week. And if you have missed a week or are new with us, all the sermons and manuscripts are available on our website.

So let me catch you up:

Last week Joseph had been brought out of prison and put in charge of all of Egypt to guide it through the famine he predicted would come. Well, what happens next is Joseph's family back in Canaan runs out of food. So, his brothers come to Egypt (without youngest brother Benjamin) to the man in charge, who they do not know is Joseph, to buy food. And as they bow before him as a sign he's in charge, he recognizes them and remembers his dreams of this very moment.

He had a dream when he was 17 that all his brothers and his dad would one day bow down to him. At the time it was crazy, but now he sees God gave him that dream to foreshadow this moment.

Joseph's whole life makes sense right in this moment. He's going to explain why to us in a minute.

Now from this moment, he begins to test his brothers to see if they've changed from the terrible people that harmed him so much so long ago.

He interrogates them, learns his little brother Ben is alive, and holds one of the other brothers hostage until the rest bring Benjamin to him so he can see for himself. After all why would he trust them at their word?

Having no choice, the brothers pay for the food and go back home to tell dad what has happened. After they run out of food, they bring Benjamin down to "the man" (Joseph) who weeps as soon as he sees him. His brother is alive! Which is good...maybe they have changed? Maybe they just kept Ben alive to get food. So Joseph tests them again to see if Judah and the rest are really different men now. So he recreates, as much as he can, the same situation from 22 years ago when they betrayed Joseph.

They pay for food, Joseph releases the hostage, and Joseph sends them on their way. This time, he puts a silver cup in young Benjamin's basket. Apparently this is Joseph's special cup. As the brothers are on their way out of town, the Egyptian police track them down and accuse them of stealing THE cup. Bizarre "valuable." Says in the passage its his cup of divination. So I'm going to assume its the Harry Potter goblet of fire.

They know they are innocent so they say go ahead, search us. And to their horror the cup is in Benjamin's sack.

And right here is the test. Will they abandon Benjamin like they did Joseph? The rest are free to leave but Ben is going to jail. Instead of abandoning his little brother, this time Judah stays with Benjamin and brings all the brothers right back to Joseph. This time to plead FOR the life of the youngest brother. That brings us to our two speeches. The speech of true repentance, followed by the speech of true forgiveness. You with me!? Ok good. Here we go.

Judah falls down desperate before Joseph:

[16] And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? **God has found out the guilt of your servants**; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found."

What guilt is he talking about? They and the reader know they are guiltless.

The guilt is over what they did to Joseph! And that guilt keeps them from trying to prove their innocence. They see this silver cup framing as God's justice on them for their betrayal of Joseph. Well, Joseph says that they don't *all* have to stay in Egypt. They should go home. Only Benjamin has to stay. He's Pressing the test into them. And that's where Judah steps up. His speech, followed by Joseph's speech, is the crux of the entire story. Here is the end of his speech:

[30] "Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, [31] as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol.

See Benjamin was now Jacob's favorite. Ben & Joseph were the only sons of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. That's why Ben didn't go the first time. It almost killed Jacob to lose Joseph, losing Ben would finish him for sure. If it isn't obvious, nobody ever gave Jacob a mug that said "world's best dad."

[32] For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' [33] **Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers.** [34] For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father."

Do you see what Judah is doing? Twenty two years earlier, Judah engineered the selling of Joseph into slavery; now he is prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel can be set free. Twenty two years earlier, he stood with his brothers and silently watched when the bloodied tunic they had brought to Jacob sent their father into a fit of

anguish; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer again that way.<sup>1</sup>

Judah has changed! This is the sign of true repentance. One commentator said “No more moving example of true contrition and repentance is to be found in scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

Listen, today is mainly about forgiveness. But we gotta stop right here to see what defines true repentance. Because that is what some of you need to do. For too many of us repentance is a synonym for “I’m sorry.” It’s merely an admission of guilt. But repentance goes far deeper than that. Here are the steps in true repentance:

1. **Admit your sin** – It’s saying I’m going the wrong direction. It’s acknowledging the direction you are heading or the action you’ve taken is sin. It’s not blame shifting or trying to weasel out of it, it’s owning your sin. Judah did this in chapter 38 when his sin of sleeping with a prostitute was uncovered. He finally stopped trying to cover up & make himself look like a good Christian boy when he wasn’t. He was a dirtbag. And he finally realized it and chose to face it. The first step in repentance is saying “I have sinned against you.” BTW – make it specific.

“When I did \_\_\_\_\_, I sinned against you and I’m sorry.”

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<sup>1</sup> Alter. *Art of Biblical Narrative* (174-175) as cited in Wenham’s *Genesis* 426.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham. *Genesis* 431

Notice how unqualified that is. To say “I sinned” and not give some kind of self defense, some kind of reasoning why you did it...**that takes humility and courage.**

Which means you are going to have to set aside a huge amount of pride and selfishness. Nobody wants to be 100% without qualification wrong. Some of you are terrible at repenting. Does this sound familiar: “I’m sorry YOU were offended by my completely reasonable and accurate comment about your mother.” That’s not repentance. That’s called picking a fight. Repentance is admitting your sin. And secondly

2. **Accept you cant fix your sin**– Sin cannot be “made right” by us. Repentance isn’t just repenting from an act, it is looking deeper to the condition of your heart. Repentance is also a statement of regret for the inner condition of your soul.

*Illustration: Nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte was well-loved. When one woman called him “saintly,” he replied, “If you could look into my soul, what you would see would make you spit in my face.”*

This is where so many get it wrong in the Christian life. They “repent” of an action and they don’t do that sin again...for a while. But then after some time passes they slip back into the same thing or sin manifests itself in a new way. What people often miss is that You have to look underneath to see sin as a symptom of a sinful heart. To just “stop sinning” is like taking pain killers for a broken arm. Pain might go away...for a minute. But if you want the

pain to stop you must fix the broken arm. Your sin is likewise a product of a sinful heart. You can't just stop sinning, You have to fix the heart. The way to fixing it is accepting you cant fix it, and instead allowing Christ to renew it. Your cannot fix your own heart. And even if you could, your sin is against an infinite God which means you owe him an infinite debt. That you cant pay.

This is where the gospel brings freedom. We recognize we are, by ourselves, doomed sinners because with a broken heart. But the gospel says God gave Christ our infinite debt *and* made us a new creation. With a Renewed heart tuned to God's desires.

3. **Turn around** – In light of God's grace in the gospel, we walk differently. We walk differently because we are now different people. You cannot turn around unless you turn first to the cross. It is the only way to forever turn from your sin. Then, Colossians 3 says you used to walk in those old ways, but that was the old self. That self has died. The new self turns from that and walks differently. Looks differently. The old Judah was all about preserving his self. The new Judah is all about sacrificing himself to preserve others. His life is markedly different now. His repentance of betraying Joseph isn't just in words, its in his actions.

This is true repentance. It happens at conversion and then it happens everyday of your life. Some of you have settled for just saying "I'm sorry God, I'll try not to do it again." Some of you in here today maybe thought you were

Christians...but if I ask you have you ever truly Admitted you are a sinner, that your are powerless to pay for your sin, accepted Jesus as that payment, and been empowered to see life change as a result...you'd say...no. THEN YOU AREN'T A CHRISTIAN.

Christians are nothing more than saved sinners! Period. I'm going to give you a chance to respond to that today in a few minutes.

Listen **you will never be able to walk in Joseph's steps of forgiveness until you walk in Judah's steps of repentance.**

And this repentance, this life transformation, is what finally moves Joseph. Look at the very next verse. Chapter 45 opens with...

[1] Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. [2] And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

Joseph is going into full on ugly cry mode. And he says

[3] And 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.

Ohhhh crap. For the brothers, this is the single worst case scenario. They were hoping this guy would say....anything else. Why? because the day of reckoning is here. The brother they betrayed now holds all the power over their future. In a moment he could condemn them to slavery, maybe even death. And what does Joseph say?

[4] And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. [5] And now do not be distressed 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 yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. [7] And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. [8] So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

WHAAAAATTTT. For those of you Christians you may have just glossed over the absurdity of what Joseph said. He said "Don't be upset about what you did to me. God is the one who sent me here."

We just saw what true repentance looked like in Judah. Now we are going to learn true forgiveness from Joseph.  
**True Forgiveness is built on good theology.**

Who is responsible for what happened to Joseph? God...or the brothers? This question confounds skeptics and

Christians alike. They call it the problem of evil. If there is a good God, how could he allow suffering?

Joseph says something that is a dilemma for every reader:  
**"You sold me, but God sent me"**

To understand the source and power of true forgiveness, you must begin with a right understanding of God's working in the world. For the next 5 minutes we are going to dive to the bottom of the deep end of the theology pool. We really never deal in the shallows here at Mercy, but we don't always dive this deep. So hold your breath. We won't stay down too long or our heads will explode.

**How is the statement you sold me, but God sent me TRUE!?** Let's look at both parts

**You Sold Me:** Clearly, the brothers are guilty for betraying Joseph. Joseph acknowledges it. The brothers feel this guilt. Reuben admitted "we are guilty concerning our brother." Judah confesses this same guilt to Joseph. The narrator tells us throughout that they did it. Not only that, the rest of scripture seems to affirm human responsibility for their actions.

Let me give you one example. King David sleeps with another man's wife & has the guy murdered. There is nothing about God forcing David to have an affair or to commit murder. That's David's decision. When people carry out acts of evil, it seems very much to be their decision, their acting, and even their guilt and remorse over it

because they did it. It's not like God possesses their body like that show heroes and they are in a trance doing God's bidding. Every person is fully doing it. The bible is abundantly clear that especially when it comes to evil, like adultery, murder, & betrayal you cannot ascribe an evil act to God.

**Psalm 5.4** – “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.”

Evil can't dwell with him. It is completely against his character to commit evil. So Joseph's brothers selling Joseph HAD to be their decision.

That's why Joseph says “You Sold Me.” YET, he says right after that...

**God Sent Me:** See as soon as Joseph saw his brothers he connected all the scenes of his life we've been talking about these last five weeks. He saw them bow down in front of him and he remembered his dreams as a 17 year old. He says to them “God sent me here.” Meaning...the dream I had that made you mad, your treachery against me, Potiphar's wife against me, my time in prison, God was somehow involved in all of that and RESPONSIBLE for it. In a 4 verse stretch (5-8) Joseph reassures them 4 times that their actions had served to further God's saving purposes. To Joseph, God didn't just make something good out of their mistakes. That would be an insufficient view of God and inconsistent with the way the bible portrays him. The bible

says God exists outside of time and sees everything. Psalm 139:

[15] My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
[16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

The Psalmist is saying God knew you when you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye. And he knows what's going to happen to you every day until you die. He even wrote it down! SO He's GOT TO BE in control of it.

SO how can God and Joseph's brothers both be responsible? And how can GOD not do anything evil, yet be the one responsible for all the bad things that have happened to Joseph!? Feeling the deep water pressure yet? I looked up the most respected academic commentary on this particular passage and here's what Gordon Wenham said:

“The relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a theological mystery that is something ultimately beyond human comprehension.”

Thanks so much Gordon.

Here's the reality: Mysteries make us uncomfortable, and that's why there is always a temptation to rationalize them, that is, to modify one belief to make it more compatible

with the other. In this case you could play down divine sovereignty by saying that certain actions fall outside the realm of God's control or, alternatively, to claim that, since all is predestined, man is not really answerable for his acts. But the Joseph story and the rest of Scripture insist that both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are at the same time true.<sup>3</sup>

So who is responsible? The brothers or God? The answer is...YES. ARGH! Pirate Growl. Lets' go up for air.

Ok, recover for a second. Take a few breaths. Let's put on your floaties and puddle jumpers and chill for a second. The sovereignty of God working through the actions of man is mysterious, yet this very mystery is the key to unlocking the power to forgive that Joseph had. I talked to your head, let me talk to your heart for a minute...Here's what this all meant to Joseph:

**1. God is BIG, we are small** – The point of the last 5 minutes was to help you see that your finite mind cannot possibly understand the infinite mind of God. We cannot see as he sees. But he is good. Joseph seems captivated by how mind blowing the plan of God is now that he sees it. And he trusts this God.

It's like he's seen the view from the top of the mountain while his brothers are all stuck in the thicket on the trail

coming up. That view makes the struggle up worth it. For him, he's seeing that God was with him through all of that pain.

Which is big because Joseph is now able to look at them and see them not as the powerful ones that ruined his life. But instead they can be just sinful people. A lot of times when we struggle to forgive someone, they loom large in our minds and hearts. But when Joseph observes GOD as so Big and powerful, he is able to see his brothers as merely sinful men. Even can see himself as a mere mortal as well. No way they could have known what was in store for Joseph nor could he. Doesn't get them off the hook, but does put them in a better perspective.

## **2. God's provision resolves Joseph's need for revenge** –

One thing you don't see at all in Joseph is vengeance. His brothers expect it to be repaid for what they did. Yet he responds with "look at God's provision." I can forgive you...why? Because I see God's provision in this. God is making good on his promise to always provide a 'remnant' for his people. Do you see?

Joseph's ability to forgive is directly tied to seeing how he and his brothers are the benefactors of God's provision through the promise to keep Israel alive. It's the promise where God told Abraham one day all the nations of earth will be blessed through you. Joseph's heart and mind are so captured by the provision of God he can't hold revenge over

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<sup>3</sup> Wenham. *Genesis* 432 - 433

them. In fact, Joseph starts to get in on God's provision and begins providing for his brothers.

[10] You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

[11] There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.'

Not only am I not going to punish you, I'm going to provide for you! I'm going to repay your evil with love and generosity!! Which leads us to...

**3. God wasn't finished with Joseph** – Joseph sees there is a purpose, God's purpose, beyond the present that his life is working for. And so he isn't consumed by what happened because he sees how God is using that for his glory. What the brothers meant for evil, God meant for good. And Joseph has his eyes and heart set on the good, not on the past pain.

I'm not trying to minimize your pain or hurt. I hope you know that. But I also know past pain has a way of consuming us. And...

**Some of you are so consumed by what happened to you that you are missing what God wants to do through you.**

Yes, maybe you were a victim like Joseph was. But God wants to use your life now for his glory! To display the gospel in ways no one else can. But you will have to forgive

and release that person who hurt you before God will move you down that road.

Where do you and I get the power to forgive like this? For us it comes through God's provision just like it did for Joseph. For us, it's God's provision in the gospel. Jesus explains it this way in a parable in Matthew 18.

He says there was a master whose servant owed him 5 lifetimes of wages. He'd never be able to repay it. The servant begged for pity and the master released him and forgave the debt. The servant now released, runs into a guy on his way home who owed him \$5 for a publix sub. The guy said hey man I don't have it on me. The servant seized him, choked him, and threw him in jail for not paying. The master found out and said "you wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant like I had mercy on you?"

Peter and the disciples listening to Jesus would have said at that point "That's crazy! That would never happen! Jesus replies Exactly! Yet that is what is happening when you who have been forgiven SO MUCH in the gospel are not able to forgive another sinner who has wronged you. It means you must not understand how much you have been forgiven!

See in the gospel you and I are the ones who have sinned against God. An infinite sin and we owe an infinite debt. Yet God released us from it! He FORGAVE US! And so we are to

likewise forgive others because our hearts are overwhelmed by his forgiveness!

Some of you hold grudges. Somebody wronged you during the first Bush Sr. administration and you still haven't forgiven them. And you are a bitter person. You know what else? You've missed the gospel. You can't simply go forgive them, you've got to meditate on how wicked you are, how holy God is, and how loving it is he didn't treat you like you are treating that person who offended you. THEN, you might be able to forgive.

Trying to teach our kids this. "I'm sorry I pulled Captain America's head off & used it to play hungry hungry hippos." "I forgive you." Not "It's ok." Sin is never ok. But it can be forgiven. And we say I forgive you because we've been forgiven too.

A few weeks ago we talked about confession and I said some of you need to confess secret sexual sin to your spouse. Well, let's say you are that spouse that was confessed to. 3 weeks later, things are a mess. You've been betrayed down to the core and you don't really trust him or her right now. How can you forgive? The gospel has to be big in your heart and in your eyes. Do you know the undeserved love of Christ for you? Only when you see that you are a forgiven sinner will you be able to truly forgive. **you will NEVER be able to forgive like Joseph until you see you are actually Judah.**

- Guys ever heard of Nelson Mandela? After 27 years in prison, he was released and elected president of South Africa. He set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—the TRC—to stop the natural pattern of revenge that occurs when one oppressed group of people take control from another. The TRC rules were simple: "if a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his [black] accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime."
- One policeman got up and faced an elderly [black] woman. He told how he had shot and killed her 18-year-old son, destroyed the evidence, and then years later burned alive the boy's father, her husband, and made her watch.
- The judge then gave the elderly woman a chance to respond. The judge asked her "What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?" The courtroom waited in hushed silence. Finally she said that she would like him to go to the spot where he burned her husband's body, and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. The policeman, head down, nodded. Then she added further that she forgave him and God forgave him, and to prove to him that the forgiveness was real, she wanted to embrace him, and she wanted him to come to her ghetto twice a month and spend the day with her, so that could be a mother to him and give him some of the love that she still had to give. "Justice was not done in South Africa that day, nor in the entire country

during the months of agonizing procedures of TRC. Something beyond justice took place. Mandela understood that when evil is done, one response alone can overcome the evil. Revenge perpetuates the evil. Justice punishes it. Evil is overcome by good only if the injured party absorbs it, refusing to allow it to go any further. And that is the pattern of otherworldly grace that Jesus showed in his life and death” paraphrase - p 224.<sup>4</sup>

Straight to close

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<sup>4</sup> Yancey, Phillip. *Rumors of Another World*

