

Joseph's brothers were scared. Should they have been? Maybe yes, maybe no. They had some reason to fear. The guilt weighing down their conscience awakened this fear within them. For they knew that they had done wrong. They had sold Joseph, their own flesh and blood, their very brother, into slavery. Now they feared that this Joseph would take revenge. They feared, for they knew that they deserved punishment for what they had done.

It had seemed like the right thing to do at the time—to get rid of Joseph. He was the favorite of their father, Jacob, who spoiled him. Joseph was given the best coat—a flashy and showy coat of many colors. How that coat irritated the brothers—a sure sign of Joseph's status as the favorite. Joseph knew it, and acted the part. He told on his brothers, bringing a bad report about them back to their father.

And so, on that day, when they were alone with the flocks in the wilderness, hidden from all other eyes—on that day when Joseph came, wearing that coat of many colors, the brothers planned what to do: let's kill him and be rid of this favorite, this nuisance. Slightly cooler heads prevail—but only slightly. They don't kill Joseph. Instead they sell him as a slave to some merchants traveling south to Egypt. They take that coat from him, soak it in blood, and take it home to Jacob. Look, they tell their dad: some animal has torn Joseph to pieces and killed him. The brother's plan worked: Joseph was gone, and nobody suspected them—they got away with it!

For years Joseph lived as a slave. And just as things got a little better for him—as he become a slave of good standing—they all fell apart. Joseph was wrongly accused, condemned, and imprisoned. For thirteen years—THIRTEEN YEARS!--Joseph is enslaved or imprisoned.

Then the Lord raises him up. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams, telling him that God was warning of a famine to come, advising Pharaoh how to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh is so impressed that he makes Joseph his second-in-command.

Picture Joseph, having suffered as a slave, having suffered in prison, now wielding power over all Egypt, disbursing food to people who would otherwise starve in the famine. Who should come to buy grain, but the very brothers who sold him into slavery! Twenty years later, they do not recognize Joseph. Twenty years they had lived with this stain on their conscience. Twenty years they had seen their father grieving for Joseph, supposing him dead. Yes, they had gotten away with it—no one caught them—but their conscience would not let them forget what they had done.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers—then they are afraid. Now the tables are turned. Now Joseph holds their lives in his hand! He can punish them however he pleases; he has all Egypt at his command. He had the authority; he had the right—they had wronged him, badly. But Joseph did no such thing. Joseph forgave them. He cared for them, and their families. He brought them down to Egypt, where they enjoyed his favor and protection. Jacob, the father who for years thought Joseph dead, came down too. For the last 17 years of his life he lived in Egypt with all his sons.

But we meet the brothers in today's reading at the end of Jacob's life. Their father lies freshly buried—and the brothers' conscience starts to fret and worry. Maybe now Joseph will have his revenge. Maybe now that Jacob is dead, he will get even with us. Maybe Joseph has been biding his time, waiting for this very opportunity. They make up some lame story to tell Joseph: before he died, dad said that you should forgive us—so, please forgive us! Their

desperate fear stands behind this message, as they grab for something, anything, to ensure their safety.

That is the power of sin and guilt. Forty years later, they cannot shake what they have done. No doubt, this never occurred to them on that day when they sold their brother as a slave. Then it seemed fine and harmless: here's our opportunity; we can get away with it—this won't harm us at all. Forty years later, and their conscience says otherwise—this hurt them deeply.

That's the power of sin. It sneaks up on you: this is no big deal, you'll get away with it, no one will be the wiser, this will make you happy as can be! Just do it, already. And then, as soon as the deed is done, sin and Satan change their tune: You did what! Do you know how bad that is? How could you do that? Guilt and shame weigh down, crushing you under the load.

And once there, guilt is hard to shake. Ask Joseph's brothers. It's been forty years—and still they tremble in fear, still they wait for their punishment to come. They are like criminals who evade the law for decades. When arrested, they often express relief: no longer are they living in fear of being arrested. The brothers too live with this fear and dread of being punished. Even after Joseph forgives them; even after he cares for them—for seventeen years! Even then the brothers fear his punishment. Even then their guilty conscience haunts them.

But Joseph does not speak of punishment. He forgives them. Do not fear, he tells them. Am I God? Obviously, no—so I will not punish you; I will continue to provide for you and yours. Here is an illustration of Jesus' words to Peter: forgive your brother when he sins against you. Forgive, for God has first forgiven you! Remember your great debt of sin, wiped clean by your heavenly Father. Mindful of this, forgive those who sin against you—you are not God, to hold their trespasses against them.

Joseph speaks kindly to his brothers and comforts them. This is the power of forgiveness: the power to bring comfort, peace, and reconciliation. What blessing for Jacob's sons, to be reconciled to each other, to dwell in peace as a family. This is the blessing God would like you to know—and so he calls you to forgive those who sin against you..

Hear this story of Joseph's brothers, driven by a guilty conscience, and watch against the power of a guilty conscience in your life. It may not jump out at you and shout: here I am, your guilty conscience. No, it may be within you only as fear, or anxiety, or worry—concern that something will catch up with you. It may rise as fear at the smallest things. Like a criminal, who trembles at the mere sight of a police officer, so a guilty conscience can make you tremble at the slightest things. Or, it may just be fear that others will find out what you have done.

Recognize a guilty conscience when it plagues you, that you may find the right cure. Do not hide from it, or try to ignore it; this will not work in the end—ask Joseph's brothers! Do not try to drown it in alcohol, or attempt to smother it by staying so busy with other things you do not need to deal with it. No, recognize that it is guilt pressing down on you, that you may confess the wrongs you have done and be forgiven. Confess your wrongs to those you have sinned against, and ask their forgiveness; confess your wrongs to the Lord, and ask His forgiveness. Go where that forgiveness is found: read of it in scripture, in places like Psalm 32 or 51; come here to his altar, where sins are forgiven in the absolution, where guilt is washed away in communion. If something is particularly troubling, make a time to come and confess it privately to a pastor, asking him to absolve you, to forgive that sin also. In Christ's forgiveness alone will your conscience find peace.

As Christ freely forgives you—and He does—forgive those who do wrong against you.

Joseph forgave his brothers, despite the thirteen years of slavery and prison they brought on him. Have you been wronged worse than that? I rather doubt it! Like Joseph, forgive those who do wrong you. Acknowledge that what they did was wrong, but do not hold it against them.

Forgive, for you have been forgiven. Christ has taken away your sin. Your great debt has been canceled completely and freely, for Christ has suffered, bled, and died for each and every one of your sins. This forgiveness is His gift, given freely to you; it comes by grace through faith. Christ is the king in the parable, who freely forgives the servant's debt out of compassion and mercy. Here, in His mercy and compassion, we find hope and comfort and peace.

Grace, mercy, compassion, faith: learn more of these in Bible class, as it begins today. We will spend the next seven weeks looking at the words of life: those words that tell how our Lord saves us by grace through faith; those words that express and proclaim the Lord's great love for us, love shown as He cleanses us of every spot and stain, love shown as He saves us by grace, through faith, counting us righteous, giving us life and salvation. Come to learn what these words mean, how they save you; come to explore the riches of God's Word expressed in these words! Bring your children also to Sunday school, that they may learn of God's love, compassion, and forgiveness there—that they may walk weekly with their Savior and know Jesus and His love.

Ten years ago today, our nation was shaken by the attacks on the twin towers. As a nation, we were attacked, and it reminded everyone how precious and how fragile life is. Whatever little flourish of religion that arose on that day is long since past, buried underneath schedules jammed so full of work, sports, and recreation that little to no time is left for God. As we pause on this tenth anniversary to remember the twin towers, pray that the Lord teach you to

number your days aright, that you may gain a heart of wisdom. Remember how fleeting life is, how quickly it passes, and what a blessing to live in the shelter and care of the eternal Lord—who will be your home now and eternally.

Draw near to your Lord, forgiven by Him, knowing that you are reconciled to Him and live at peace with Him through Jesus' blood. Live at peace with others by giving them the same forgiveness, being reconciled to those you have wronged and those who have wronged you.

Here is true fulfillment and peace. Here is abiding mercy and love. Amen.