

# THE PITFALL OF BITTERNESS

**THE POINT:**  
RELATIONSHIPS CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WITH FORGIVENESS.

Leader pages on pp. 152-155

## GENESIS 45:1-5,9-11

<sup>1</sup> Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants, so he called out, "Send everyone away from me!" No one was with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> But he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and also Pharaoh's household heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But they could not answer him because they were terrified in his presence.

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<sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please, come near me," and they came near. "I am Joseph, your brother," he said, "the one you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now don't be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.

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<sup>9</sup> "Return quickly to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: "God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me without delay. <sup>10</sup> You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near me—you, your children, and your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and all you have. <sup>11</sup> There I will sustain you, for there will be five more years of famine. Otherwise, you, your household, and everything you have will become destitute.'"

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### MEMORY VERSE

**Hebrews 12:15**—Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many.

### KEYWORDS

**God sent me ahead (v. 5)**—This is one of the most eloquent affirmations in the Bible regarding God's sovereignty in human events.  
**Preserve life (v. 5)**—One of the two vital things God accomplished through Joseph's leadership leading up to and during

the seven year famine. The other thing was to establish "a remnant within the land" (v. 7).  
**Goshen (v. 10)**—This region was located in the eastern portion of Egypt's Nile Delta and also known as "the land of Rameses" (47:11).

## HOW CAN WE PREVENT BITTERNESS IN A RELATIONSHIP?

As kids, we could look at certain foods and be convinced it would taste bad. And some foods can surprise us. Take, for example, an apple. Nothing tastes better than biting into a pretty red apple—and nothing tastes worse than discovering that apple is quite bitter! You don't want someone snapping your picture at that moment because a twisted up face isn't the best for a photo opportunity.

The face of bitterness is not attractive, yet many people wear that face today. Their bitter expressions are not because of unpleasant food, but because of painful moments in their past. We can wash away the bitter taste of bad food, but the bitterness that comes from the betrayal of others or our own bad decisions can rob us of our joy and prevent us from moving forward with God and others.

Joseph displayed a different face. Joseph provides a pattern for us to follow, as he refused to be bitter. He chose to forgive and let his brothers “off the hook” for what they did to him. We, too, can choose to be bitter or better.

### Embrace Your Pain // Genesis 45:1-3

Many of us have moments when our emotions overwhelm us, sometimes at the most unexpected times. A song comes on the radio and sparks memories. Tears stream down your face. Emotions are part of God's gift to humanity. Healthy people share their emotions and feelings with God and loved ones.

Joseph experienced such a wave of emotion. He had been “playing” his brothers since their first visit to Egypt, but the peak of the events finally caused him to lose his composure. As Judah pleaded for Benjamin, his brothers' love and compassion for both Benjamin and their father touched Joseph deeply (Gen. 44:18-34). “Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants” (v. 1). It was time to “come clean” and share what was in his heart.

Joseph certainly had faith in God, but he may have struggled with bitterness at the injustices he suffered. His brothers' disloyalty and cruelty probably came to mind over the thirteen years,



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but experiencing their changed behavior was emotionally overwhelming for Joseph, such that he wept loudly and was moved to respond.

Overpowering fear plowed into Joseph's brothers, as this powerful man revealed his identity. Joseph's brothers were still "terrified in his presence" (v. 3). Moments before he had been a harsh ruler and they were strangers; now he suddenly spoke with warmth and tenderness and called them brothers.

The brothers' dismay was probably from fear of punishment. Joseph had displayed his power and authority in their presence; now they knew he was also their brother and feared he would use his power to get revenge against them. Joseph's brothers' fear reveals that their hearts weren't right with God. Guilt had weighed them down for years.

It wasn't yet clear to the brothers that Joseph's tears were reflecting his joy and not bitterness. As Joseph's story continues, we see his love, concern, and forgiveness toward his brothers. At that moment, the brothers were likely too shocked to sense Joseph's love. They are an example of the biblical truth in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So, the one who fears is not complete in love."

### WHAT ARE OTHER WAYS JOSEPH COULD'VE RESPONDED TO HIS BROTHERS?

Joseph didn't act like the past never happened, but he didn't hold it against his brothers. He chose to move on.

### Forgive Freely // Genesis 45:4-5

A person will hide a gift behind his back, waiting for the perfect moment to surprise the recipient. God puts something behind His back, but it's not a gift; it's our sin. "Indeed, it was for my own well-being that I had such intense bitterness; but your love has delivered me from the Pit of destruction, for you have thrown all my sins behind your back" (Isa. 38:17). Isn't this a powerful picture of forgiveness? God chooses to put our past behind Him!

Joseph revealed the heart of our heavenly Father and chose to forgive his brothers. Notice the affection he showed them:



## DIGGING DEEPER COME NEAR

Why did Joseph ask his brothers to "come near" to him (Gen. 45:4)? Of course, his invitation allowed them to get a better look at him to confirm his identity. However, Joseph's invitation also nudged them to diminish the distance in their relationship with him. Joseph wanted to speak to them more intimately, this time explicitly identifying himself. The last time they remembered seeing Joseph, he had begged them not to sell him to traders (42:21). This time he held their fate. With his invitation, Joseph tried to remove the fear that prompted them to misunderstand his intention. By taking the initiative to nourish their relationship, Joseph attempted to demonstrate his forgiveness.

### What are the benefits of seeking to restore broken relationships?



“Please, come near me.” Any hard feelings were removed by the power of grace.

Joseph extended forgiveness to his brothers, and we can do the same with those who hurt us. We all need to be forgiven, accepted, and loved. We long to receive forgiveness and yet struggle to give it. Grace is the only way to live in close relationship with others. Joseph expressed grace to his brothers. “Then Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. Joseph kissed each of his brothers as he wept, and afterward his brothers talked with him” (Gen. 45:14-15). His outward affection was a sign of his inward forgiveness.

As he forgave, Joseph called on his brothers to forgive themselves. “And now don’t be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here” (v. 5). In our humanity, we may want those who hurt us to “beat themselves up” over what they did. Forgiveness doesn’t require that. We might wait for years for an apology before deciding to forgive. This is unbiblical and unhealthy. We forgive because it’s the right thing to do, regardless of their response.

### WHAT CAUSES US TO SOMETIMES HOLD ON TO GRUDGES AND WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS?

Joseph saw what God was doing, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve life” (v. 5). Joseph wasn’t excusing their sinful behavior, but he saw God had been and was still working to redeem a bad situation for His glory. Since God uses even painful things that happen to us, why should we be unforgiving? Even more so, how can we be unforgiving when God has forgiven us of so much more? “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ” (Eph. 4:32).

## Seek the Other’s Best

// Genesis 45:9-11

As God’s people, we’re blessed to be a blessing. Sharing our lives and our gifts with others is central to who we are as Christ-followers. It was the Lord Jesus who said, “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Following Jesus means we serve God while serving others.

In Genesis 45:7, Joseph explained his great promotion in Egypt: “God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.” Joseph didn’t view his story as that of a self-made man. God exalted him to serve others.

In our social media world, self-glorification is more tempting than ever. We can enhance photos of ourselves with filters and other tools that can make it seem like we’re much better than we truly are. While sitting at a stoplight, I read the bumper sticker on the car ahead of me: “If only my life could be as great as yours appears on Facebook.” God hasn’t put us on this earth to build up ourselves. He placed us here to build up the kingdom, and His kingdom consists of people. Therefore our focus should be on the ones closest to us.

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Because Joseph had seen the prolonged famine coming, he commanded his brothers to go home and return quickly with their father, their families, and all their belongings. He followed up his forgiveness by seeking what was best for them. With their brother Joseph's promise of provision, they headed home with joy and hope. Not only had Joseph forgiven the past, but he was committed to caring for them in the future.

Joseph's actions reflect the power of the gospel. As a person comes to faith in Christ, not only is his record of sin erased, but his eternal future in heaven is secured. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). The same One who sought our best by securing our salvation continues to seek our best through His daily care and provision. The future is bright for all who love Christ and have made Him Lord of their lives.

That means we trust Jesus, and we have nothing to fear in the future when our trust is in Christ. Praise God that we live under His banner of love—and with even greater riches in His storehouses.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Joseph's story reveals he was only a teenager when he was sold into Egyptian slavery (Gen. 37:2, 27). Another two decades passed before he was raised to power in Egypt (Gen. 41:46). Almost another decade passed before he was reunited with his brothers who had betrayed him (Gen. 45:3). Many years were lost with his family due to his brothers' cruelty which could've created bitterness and a desire for revenge. Though Joseph's circumstances looked miserable and were undeserved, God used them to raise him to second in command of the strong Egyptian nation. God enabled a former slave and prisoner to control the nation that would impact the world. Joseph's faith and trust in God was displayed as he used his power to provide salvation for his family and the multitudes.

**What can we learn from Joseph's life that enables us to reflect faith and forgiveness as Christ-followers instead of bitterness and revenge?**

## LIVE IT

### What can help us seek to forgive those who have wrongfully hurt us?

Bitterness is often caused by deep hurts or suffering. Its root word *bitter* is defined in two ways according to Merriam Webster: accompanied by severe pain or suffering, or being relentlessly determined.<sup>26</sup> The same word has two different meanings. Here are ways we can transform bitterness in our lives from causing suffering to motivating our determination.

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- **Carry on.** Take your eyes off the source of your suffering to avoid bitterness and turn them to Jesus and the example He set in seeking the joy that comes beyond suffering (Heb. 12:2).
- **Carry over.** When we struggle to shift our focus away from sources of hurt, turn to God's Word and carry over or apply His truth to your situation to extend forgiveness (Heb. 12:14-15).
- **Carry through.** Share with someone who does not know God how He has empowered you to carry through with forgiveness. Because He forgives us, He expects us to forgive others (Matt. 6:14-15).

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. FACING PAIN // GENESIS 45:1-2

Have you ever experienced deep hurt that cut you to your core? Joseph did and came face-to-face with it when he was reunited with his brothers who betrayed him. Seeing their concern for their younger brother and their father, Joseph finally released the pain he'd carried for so long. When we face deep pain, we might hold onto it for revenge, fear of deeper hurt, or denial that it even exists, which can cause bondage. While facing the pain may be difficult, with God as our comfort and peace, we can be freed of it and find the strength to heal.

**Purposefully, give your hurts to God in exchange for the comfort only He can provide.**

## 2. SOVEREIGN GRACE // GENESIS 45:5

One of God's most beautiful characteristics is His grace. Though we're undeserving of His favor, He showers us with it. Jesus modeled God's grace when facing death. He prayed, "Father forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Like Jesus, Joseph, who is considered possibly one of the closest people in character to Jesus, modeled the same. He showed his understanding and acceptance of the power of God's sovereign grace that kept him through hardships. When we're offered an opportunity to extend grace to others, by doing so, we put God on center stage to be witnessed through our lives.

**Even though it may be challenging, let the character of Christ shine through you. Extend grace to others like He would.**

## 3. A PRESENT HELP // GENESIS 45:9,11

Jacob's family was facing destitution due to famine. As they became desperate after two years in this plight, he sent his sons to a neighboring land to find help. He may have reflected on what happened when he sent out his most beloved son, Joseph, years ago and was concerned for their safety.

Jacob sent his sons hoping to find grain to sustain their family, but what they found was much more. He probably never imagined the answer to their current situation would come from the heartbreaking loss he had experienced decades before. Yet God had already destined Joseph to be the present help for Jacob's family.

**Invite God to teach you to rely on Him to be a present help in your time of need.**

## 4. SELFLESS AMBITION // PHILIPPIANS 2:3

Through the story of Joseph's life, there is an overarching theme related to his character. He displayed the Christ-like attribute of humility consistently regardless of the circumstances he was in. Joseph modeled what we as Jesus' followers should strive for, the humble heart of a servant.

We can cultivate humility by being selfless instead of selfish. By giving others value above self and seeking their good, we represent Christ well and personify His goodness. Be more concerned about lifting others, and trust God to lift you.

**Ambitiously seek to be more like God. Allow Him to search your heart, reveal and remove any traits that are not like Him. Invite God to replace them with everything like Him.**

## 5. FOR GREATER GOOD // ROMANS 8:28

We never know how God may use delightful or difficult situations in our lives. If we as Christ-lovers trust God is in control, we can be assured He allows all things for a reason. A good discipline to develop, instead of being disappointed with God or upset with others who may have caused us difficulty, is to acknowledge God is always good and He ensures our good. From creation's beginning, we know all God orchestrated was good, so we can trust that He will continue to provide good for us daily.

**Ask God to teach you to trust Him as you seek to see His greater good in all things. Your trust should always be in God.**