

SESSION 5

OVERCOME BITTERNESS



*How would you describe the taste
of bitterness?*

QUESTION #1

#BSFLbitterness

THE POINT

Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Let's admit it: forgiving another person can be hard. Really hard.

During a routine sweep of Central Park, NYPD officer Steven McDonald was shot in the back of the head three times by a 15-year-old kid. Because of that momentary act of violence, Steven has spent the last 28 years confined to a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. He hasn't held his wife in two decades. He has never held or played catch with his son, who was born just a few months after the shooting.

But Steven *has* forgiven the young man who shot him. "I forgave him because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart," he said. "Such an attitude would have extended my injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. . . . I have come to realize that anger is a wasted emotion."¹

In our study of Joseph's life, we've seen a man who had every reason to feel hurt, angry, and bitter. But he chose forgiveness, instead.

WHAT DOES **THE BIBLE** SAY?

Genesis 45:3-11 (HCSB)

3 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.

4 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.

5 And now don’t be worried or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.

6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting.

7 God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

9 “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.

10 You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near me—you, your children, and grandchildren, your sheep, cattle, and all you have.

11 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.””



Genesis 45:3-4

While God's warning and Joseph's plan helped Egypt survive the famine, others didn't fare so well. Jacob and his family were among those who suffered, which meant they were forced to join the many nations coming to Egypt for grain. Genesis 42–44 tells about a series of tests Joseph put his brothers through when they arrived in Egypt—tests designed to reveal any changes in their character. It was only after Judah offered his own life in place of Benjamin's (see Gen. 44:18-34) that Joseph revealed who he was, welcoming his brothers back into his world.

Declaring "I am Joseph" must have been a powerful moment for Joseph, but what happened afterward certainly could have gone differently. Joseph could have followed his introduction by asking, "How do you like my coat now? Ever been in a pit? Let me introduce you to one." Such statements may have been justified based on the way his brothers had treated him years earlier. However, after revealing his identity, Joseph exposed his values and longing by asking, "Is my father still living?"

What a moment for Joseph's brothers! In an instant, the weight of their guilt and lies was exchanged for a heart-stopping realization that the next few moments might be their last. Joseph could have ended their lives simply by waving his hand. Instead, Joseph invited them to come closer.

The brothers received an invitation to be restored in their relationship. The dreamer they had once despised so severely and had removed from their presence offered them a chance to come close again. They were given a second chance: the burden of their lies removed, the relationship repaired, and forgiveness extended. Only Joseph had the power to make this happen.

*How can we let go
of the past without
forgetting it?*

QUESTION #2



Genesis 45:5-8

Joseph added another amazing statement: it was all God's plan. Not only did Joseph's words imply forgiveness, they also allowed his brothers to see that they'd all been instruments in God's plan.

The brothers had paid a high price all their lives for the awful thing they'd done to Joseph. His caring words to them were, "Don't be worried or angry with yourselves," which can also be translated, "Don't grieve."

Grief is such a powerful emotion. Its effects can include nausea, insomnia, and depression—all of which can last for years. The longer the grieving process, the greater the impact on the individual. Have you ever noticed someone's demeanor and immediately knew he or she must be carrying a heavy burden? Joseph saw that in his brothers and said, "Don't be worried or angry with yourselves."

Joseph gave his brothers permission to stand tall. He said it was God and not his brothers who had sent him there to Egypt.

- ▶ God brought a caravan at just the right time (see Gen. 37:25).
- ▶ God "introduced" Joseph to the baker and the cupbearer (see Gen. 40:2-4).
- ▶ God sent the dreams to Pharaoh and gave Joseph the ability and the opportunity to interpret his dreams and offer a plan of action (see Gen. 41:25-36).

God is at work in your life also, even in difficult and trying circumstances. Consider that God may be using difficult situations (and difficult people) to bring you into a better place and a closer walk with Him. Don't hold those circumstances against the other people involved. **Allow God to work through your heartfelt, honest words—words that could speak freedom and forgiveness.**

When have you been willing to forgive?

QUESTION #3

Genesis 45:9-11

Restoration is an amazing thing. In session four I mentioned my friend whose house had burned down. He later told me about moving back into their renovated home. He and his wife walked through the new front door onto the new ceramic tile that had replaced the old, dark-brown flooring. There were new cabinets and plumbing, new lights, new closets, and a new fireplace with a beautiful new mantel. He told me later he could hardly remember what the house looked like before the fire.

A restored home is nice, but a restored relationship is truly amazing.

When Joseph covered the relationship with his brothers in forgiveness, all of their lives gained a new color and a new texture. The doorway of resentment and hurt was pulled down and replaced with an entrance into love and mutual concern. They started walking on a new foundation in their relationship that no longer was cracked, broken, or worn out from betrayal and lies; they walked on hope instead. It was a new day indeed.

Joseph knew one man still was filled with mourning and sorrow: his father, Jacob. Joseph directed his brothers to leave immediately and to tell their father the news. They were to tell the truth this time. Jacob's 13-year time of grief finally would turn to joy; he surely would remember the dreams Joseph had spoken of as a teenager (see Gen. 37:5-11) and realize they had come to pass.

The separation between Joseph and his family involved much more than the desert sand and rocky mountains between them. Their relationships had been broken. But Joseph wished for intimacy again. And just like in verse 4 when he asked his brothers to come closer, in verse 10 he emphasized his desire for family closeness again. "Settle in the land of Goshen and be near me."

The space between them was removed with forgiveness.

How did Joseph's actions in this story mirror God's actions toward us?

QUESTION #4

What actions on our part begin and maintain the process of reconciliation?

QUESTION #5

"Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart!"

— CORRIE TEN BOOM



LISTEN UP

Listen to the song "Bend" by Brandon Heath as a way of reflecting on Joseph's larger story. (Using an app to read the QR Code below will link to the song on *Worship-HouseMedia.com*.)

Use the space provided to record your reactions to that story. Don't be afraid to get creative by expressing yourself through a picture, a list of emotions, your own song, etc.



LIVE IT OUT

How can you incorporate forgiveness into your everyday life? Consider the following steps:

- ▶ **Connect with family.** Take time this week to intentionally connect with a family member. Invest in your relationships as a preventative measure against bitterness and strife.
- ▶ **Identify your hurts.** Think through the major pain points that cause you to harbor unforgiveness against others. Ask God to help you understand those hurts, but also to forgive even as He has forgiven you.
- ▶ **Apologize when necessary.** If you've wronged someone, acknowledge it. Be bold in asking for forgiveness.



It's hard to let go of the hurt others have caused. Sometimes it seems nearly impossible. But it's worth the effort. Why? Because the taste of forgiveness is far sweeter than the taste of bitterness.

I'd Love You All Over Again



I was completely caught off guard. Thinking that we were going to have lunch with friends, I didn't question my wife, Melody, when she jumped into the driver's seat. It was our fifth anniversary, and I probably should've been aware that she was up to something. While she drove, I returned a phone call and didn't realize anything was out of the ordinary until she made a turn in the opposite direction of our friends' neighborhood. Rather than offer an explanation, she reached into the console and handed me an envelope.



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My group's prayer requests

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My thoughts

1. CBS New York, "25 Years Later, Paralyzed NYPD Detective McDonald Still Inspiring Others," <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2011/07/12/25>, (published July 12, 2011) (accessed March 3, 2014).