

Gen 42-45 (focus Gen 45:4-9)
Forgiveness: Recognizing God's Sovereignty

Introduction

Eric Lomax was a British soldier who was tortured by the Japanese as a POW during World War II. He died in 2012 at the age of 93. Before his death, he wrote a memoir titled "The Railway Man".

Eric Lomax and thousands of British POWs were forced to build the Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway. The building of this railroad and the brutality involved was portrayed in the 1957 Hollywood movie "Bridge on the River Kwai".

In his memoir, Eric Lomax recollected how he was repeatedly beaten and interrogated after a radio receiver was found in his possession. One of his torturers stood out—an interpreter by the name of Nagase Takashi.

Eric Lomax confessed: "At the end of the war, I would have been happy to murder him." He also described how he had tried to find Takashi, searching for information about him in the 1980s.

The two war-time enemies finally met in 1993, after Lomax had read an article about Takashi's being devastated by guilt over his torture of one particular British soldier. Lomax realized that that soldier was himself.

At this meeting, Takashi was trembling and crying, and he said over and over again, "I am so sorry, so very sorry."

Lomax wrote in his memoir: "I had come with no sympathy for this man, but through his complete humility, things turned completely around. In the days that followed we spent a lot of time together, talking and laughing. We promised to keep in touch and have remained friends ever since."

In an interview some time later, Lomax revealed that his anger and bitterness towards Imperial Japan had created psychological problems in his personal life.

He added, "I haven't forgiven Japan as a nation, but I've forgiven one man, because he's experienced such great personal regret."

What Eric Lomax had experienced is a real human struggle—wanting very much to forgive on the one hand, yet still wallowing very much in bitterness on the other.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/books/eric-lomax-river-kwai-prisoner-who-forgave-dies-at-93.html>)

Even for us Christians, whenever suffering hits us hard, especially in a way we view as unjustified, many questions loom before us:

- Where is God in all of this?
- Where is the hand of God?
- Where is the heart of God?
- Where is the mind of God?

As God's people, we often ask these heart-wrenching questions not because we don't want to believe in God anymore. It is simply because we desperately want to continue to believe in God amidst our struggle.

Understanding who God is, who we are, and how God works in the world gives us a framework for responding to life's darkest times.

But we are finite beings. So, no matter how much we think we understand, there is much more we don't understand. So, we ask this question: "How does God accomplish his own designs for us?" The answer is: "Sometimes He uses adversity and mistreatment." When we are going through the ordeal of being unfairly attacked, or when our reputation is being publicly smeared, or when our friends betray us, it may APPEAR impossible that such things could accomplish anything good. BUT they do. The key is the word "appear". What we see is far less than what God sees. And the good that may come from the seemingly misdeeds of others is not seen in advance or not seen at all, EXCEPT by faith. God can get Himself involved even when we think nothing good is happening.

In the Bible, one excellent example of this is the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. It all begins when Joseph has a dream that someday he will be exalted above his brothers. Of course, his brothers aren't thrilled about it. Soon their hearts burn with envy, jealousy, and malice against Joseph. When opportunity presents itself, they throw Joseph into a pit, intending to leave him for dead. However, they end up selling him into slavery to some Midianite traders. Then they go back home; tell their father Jacob that Joseph is dead, and forgetting all about him.

Meanwhile, Joseph is purchased by Potiphar (Pharaoh's head of security) who makes him head over his household where he rises to prominence. Later, he's falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of sexual assault when she fails to seduce him. After being thrown in jail, he meets the baker and the cupbearer; correctly predicts that the baker will die but the cupbearer will be released. He asks the released cupbearer to remember him, but the cupbearer forgets until Pharaoh has a strange dream. The cupbearer remembers Joseph who is then released; correctly interprets Pharaoh's dream, and is elevated by Pharaoh to the number-two position in Egypt.

In Gen 42-44, we read of a terrible famine that strikes the Middle East. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt looking for food. They meet Joseph but don't recognize him. Joseph sets a series of tests so that he can determine the sincerity and goodwill of his brothers. Eventually the moment comes when Joseph reveals his true identity.

That brings us to Genesis 45 where Joseph sends his Egyptian servants away and reveals himself to his brothers. Understandably, they are terrified to meet the brother they had sold into slavery. Now he has them firmly in his grasp. He can order them killed, or tortured, or imprisoned, and it will be done.

For our purpose today, I want to just focus on Gen 45:4-9. I believe these six verses capture the very essence of Chap 45. The verses following Gen 45:4-9 tell of how Joseph arranges for his whole family in Canaan (including his father Jacob) to be settled in Egypt, and to provide for them abundantly.

Let us now look at Gen 45:4-9 (ESV):

4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. 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.

9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry.'"

In v. 7, Joseph said to his brothers who had done him wrong: "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors." So the very first thing we learn here is ...

I. God never plans any wrong, but He can use what seems a wrong to fulfil His plan.

If anyone has a right to be bitter, it is Joseph. He has "lost" many years being cut off from his own family. The temptation to get even must have been great. But what he says in vv. 4-9 essentially summarizes how He sees God's hand in the events of his life.

There is great irony in his words. The very thing used against him (i.e. the betrayal of his brothers) results in his exaltation so that he can now save the

brothers who betrayed him. The central truth is in verse 8: “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

These are the words of a man of faith. He mentions God four times in vv. 4-9 so that his brothers won't miss the point. “I haven't forgotten what you did to me, but that's not the issue. You did what you did because you wanted to harm me. But God allowed it to happen so that I would end up powerful in Egypt. And at the exact moment when you need me, I would be there to save you and your descendants.” His vision of God is so great that it dwarfs the wrong done to him by his brothers.

To be sure, God didn't cause the brothers of Joseph to envy him nor Potiphar's wife to seduce him. His brothers and Potiphar's wife did that on their own choosing. God allowed them to do what they did and in so doing, revealed the evil that was already in their heart.

Satan is a roaring lion who prowls the world, looking for those he can destroy (1 Peter 5:8). But though he possesses great power, he can do nothing without God's sovereign permission. E.g. in Job 1, Satan cannot afflict Job beyond the limits established by God. The devil is powerful, but he is not omnipotent. He operates within the limits imposed on him by God.

We see God doing this in the life of Joseph. In His sovereign grace, God stretches forth His restraining hand so that evil things do not get out of control in Joseph's life.

Conversely, sometimes God's harshest judgment is to keep still His sovereign hand and do nothing at all. E.g. He may harden the heart of those who stubbornly prefer to do evil, revealing the evil already in their heart as they choose to obey Satan and disobey God (as in the case of Pharaoh in Moses' time). However, God can use the evil deeds of evildoers to further His own plans in the world. E.g. in the case of Jesus Christ, God used the wicked deeds of evil men in crucifying Jesus Christ to bring about salvation to the world.

God never plans any wrong, but He can use what seems a wrong to fulfil His plan. A bad start can lead to a beautiful finish because God is still at work and in control. Joseph recognized that the sovereign hand of God was still in control even in the wrong done to him by his brothers. And he made that one key contribution to the healing of the hurt in him and the guilt in his brothers—he forgave.

Knowing that God never plans any wrong, but He can use what seems a wrong to fulfil His plan can help us in our faith life. This brings me to my second point ...

II. We can demonstrate strength, hope and goodwill even in our troubled world.

When we focus on immediate causes of our troubles, we often end up in despair, anger and bitterness. It's very easy to think only of the people who have hurt us deeply. But as long as we focus solely on the people who hurt us, we are doomed to dwell in the swamp of bitterness.

Now, let me hasten to add that God's good purposes and the evil deeds of people are totally different. Evil people want to harm us, to drag us down, to hurt us deeply, and to discourage us. Not so the Lord. He may allow these evil ones to taunt and torment us. But His purposes are higher, better and nobler. He allows and can use their unkindness to humble us, leading us to cry out to Him and to experience His mighty deliverance. What evil people intend and what God intends are two totally different things—they intend it for evil, but God intends it for good.

God knows how to discipline those who take unfair advantage of people or go out of their way to mistreat people. The day will come when they will be brought low before the Lord. They will someday be called to account—if not in this life, then in the life to come. The scales of justice will be balanced in the end. This is true and comforting once we can view the hand of God even in the hurtful events of life.

This was the key that opened the way for Joseph to journey from bitterness to forgiveness. He saw God even in the hurtful events of his life. He had such a profound sense of God's presence that he could see the hand of God working behind the scenes. Thus he could say to his brothers, "It was not you but God who sent me to Egypt." The same is true of his seduction by Potiphar's wife, the false rape accusation, and the years he spent in prison. Joseph believed God was still there when all these bad things happened. More than that, He believed God was still in charge even when all these happened. Joseph recognized that everything that happened—the good and the bad—was part of God's ultimate plan for his life. He was sent to Egypt to save the lives of his own family one day. This was God's plan from the very beginning.

Joseph had suffered much injustice and mistreatment by his brothers and others. But when his brothers came to him in Egypt, he stood before them not as a weak victim, but as a strong victor; not as one without hope, but as one who can bring hope to one and all as the "lord of all Egypt" (v. 9); not as one who showed grudges to those who'd wronged him, but as one who's magnanimous enough to shower grace and goodwill even to those who had wronged him. Why? It is because Joseph recognized the sovereignty of God in his life.

Our troubles are not events that have caught the sovereign God by surprise. Thus, we can demonstrate strength, hope and goodwill even in our troubled world. To be sure, Joseph did not approve the wrong done to him. But

because he recognized God's sovereign work in his life, he was able to rise above the wrong done to him by doing this one thing—he forgave.

When we capture this profound view of the sovereignty of God even in the “bad” things in life, it will help us to love and live differently. And this brings me to my third point ...

III. To forgive those who hurt us is to love and live like Christ.

Of course, not every story has a happy ending. Sometimes there is no reconciliation, and sometimes the mistreatment continues unabated. But if we believe in the sovereignty of God, we have a godly reason to forgive those who hurt us deeply. I don't say that we should forget what they did to us. We can't really forget because the memories can be deep and indelible. But we can forgive even when we can't forget. To forgive means we no longer are troubled by the hurts of the past, and even if we do remember them, the hurts sting no more.

Life is like a jigsaw puzzle. As the years pass we pick up more pieces to the puzzle. Things that once troubled us now seem to fit into place. And we come to a new appreciation of the wisdom of God as we begin to understand that nothing is ever wasted. Everything has a place in your life and my life somewhere, somehow.

Life can be such that you may spend days or weeks or years in the dark colours of life. Sickness, heartache, tragedy, mistreatment and betrayal may cause you to think that there are no brighter colours. But God is painting a masterpiece in your life and before He is finished, He will use every colour on His palette. If you do not see the final product on earth, you will see it clearly in heaven. This also implies that it is still possible for any circumstance and any character to change for the better if the Lord has not yet blown the final whistle.

How can we live and see life like this in a world where hurtful events are always happening? We live and see this way by faith. We choose to believe that God is in charge and in control over everything that happens. Faith like this is made strong when it is based on the Word of God. And that's why the biblical account of Joseph's life is so important—God uses his life journey to teach us how to forgive those who have hurt us:

1. First, we learn to take our eyes off the hurt and the person, and put our gaze on the Lord. We can't keep looking at the hurt and replaying it over and over in our mind. We must fix our eyes on the Lord. As hard as it is, we ask the Lord to help us think on things lovely and noble. Even after we have forgiven someone at a decisive point in time, we may still continue to struggle with lingering bitterness or hurt. How wonderfully perfect it would be if we can forgive quickly and completely all at once. But forgiveness is often a process. Thankfully, the Lord understands our struggle and He will help us go through the healing

process. Always be ready and willing to reaffirm our decision to forgive, and ask the Lord to help and heal us at the same time. In that sense, even if we have chosen to forgive, we still look to the Lord to help us keep forgiving ... until the hurts sting no more.

2. Second, we learn to exercise grace and wisdom. We as God's people have received His grace of forgiveness, cleansing and salvation in Jesus Christ. Always remember that we have been blessed with this divine grace. And now, we go and do likewise—not returning evil with evil, but bestowing grace and kindness. To forgive those who hurt us is to love and live like Christ.

Interestingly, nowhere in the Bible did Joseph say explicitly to his brothers, “I forgive you for the wrong you did to me.” After the death of the patriarch Jacob, his brothers (fearing for their lives) told him in Gen 50:17 – “Our father wanted you to forgive us.” How did Joseph reply in Gen 50:19 – “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?”

Our troubled world today is bleeding with much “bad blood”. This is because people return evil with evil; practise tit for tat. But when Joseph said implicitly to his brothers that he’s not in the place of God, he’s telling them that he’s leaving all vindication and vengeance in the sovereign hand of God.

So Joseph never said explicitly to his brothers, “I forgive you for the wrong you did to me.” But we can conclude almost with certainty that he had indeed forgiven them. What does this imply? This implies that sometimes the best way we show forgiveness is not so much in saying the mere three words—“I forgive you”—but in showing grace and goodwill through our attitudes and actions towards those who have hurt us.

Does this mean we should behave naively and not set appropriate checks and boundaries? Of course not! The fact that Joseph had earlier set a series of tests to ascertain the sincerity and goodwill of his brothers tells me that he’s aware that his brothers could still harbour devious intentions when they appeared before him. So to forgive after being hurt or harmed doesn’t mean we naively ignore the problems. Rather, it calls us to be wise in our future interactions so as to protect ourselves from being hurt or harmed again, as well as to preserve the goodwill in our relationships with others.

To err is human; to forgive is divine. But when we forgive, we ourselves don’t become divine (we don’t become gods). Rather, we behave more like Christ. Joseph exemplified in action the words of our Lord Jesus who said on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they were doing” (Luke 23:34) by doing this one thing—he forgave.

These same last words of Jesus on the cross are also for us today. When we forgive those who hurt us, we learn to love and live like Christ; thereby not merely hearing His words but doing them as well.

Conclusion

Joseph recognized the sovereignty of God in his life, and he forgave his brothers. His forgiveness is only a human reflection of a much more supreme forgiveness—the forgiveness of God. It is the forgiveness that God offers in Jesus Christ to sinful humanity because of His sovereign love, grace, and mercy. There is no greater peace than knowing and being blessed by the truth that our sins are forgiven when we believe in Jesus Christ and receive Him into our lives. We can come to Jesus on all occasions, and find courage in His presence. And we can also look with hope to Jesus' coming again as the all-righteous Judge over our troubled world.

To those who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, bad things may seem to happen with no ultimate purpose. Not so for those who know the Lord. As a believer in Jesus Christ navigates a stormy sea, he does so knowing that an all-wise, all-mighty Captain is at the helm. Even when the waves rise around him and threaten to cast him into the deep, he can still have God-given peace, courage, and hope in his circumstances.

If you wish to know more about how trusting in Jesus Christ can give you that sense of peace, courage, and hope in our turbulent world today, I encourage you to talk with a Christian you know.

For Christians listening today, you are reminded of the promise of godly peace, courage and hope even in your struggles as you rest in Christ. Thus, the Christian is reminded to walk by faith, not by sight. Not every event makes good sense or any sense at all to you. But you and I are reminded to see with eyes of faith that day when the Lord will come to make all things beautiful, and we will then appreciate how all things (good and bad) fit into His perfect plan for us and for this world.

Nelson Mandela was a lawyer who went on to become the face of justice and equality for the black people in South Africa.

One time after he was elected as the President of South Africa, Mandela was having lunch along with his security guards at a restaurant.

Then, Mandela spotted a man sitting across at the opposite table. He told his guards to ask that man to join them for lunch. That man came over to join them but sat quietly the whole time. After some waiting, their food arrived, and everyone ate. The man too was eating, but his hands were trembling.

Without uttering a word, he quietly ate his food and left. Mandela's guards guessed that the man might have been very sick because he was trembling so badly.

To this, Nelson Mandela shook his head and said that he knew that man. He was the jailor of the prison where Mandela was once imprisoned. And that man had given him a very tough time, subjecting him to all kinds of torture.

When Mandela invited him over to join them for lunch, the man thought that the President might be seeking revenge. But Mandela did no such thing. It is not in his character to be vindictive, even to those who had done him wrong. Mandela believed that unresolved feelings of bitterness and hurt will only beget more bitterness and hurt, leaving no place for forgiveness and healing to come to pass.

In fact, on the day when he was released after being imprisoned for a total of 27 years for his anti-apartheid activism, Mandela said this: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

To forgive is to release a prisoner, and to know that that prisoner is you yourself before anyone else.

(<https://www.thinkright.me/en/think-right/a-life-altering-lesson-by-nelson-mandela>)

Forgiveness is never easy. The road of forgiveness will seem like weakness to those who don't believe in God. But as hard it is, it is far better than giving in to bitterness that corrodes the heart and destroys the soul. Those who believe in God's sovereignty can overcome the poison of bitterness with the antidote of forgiveness.

Our unforgiveness keeps us down. But when we forgive, God can pick us up and help us rise to a greater height. So let me make this summary statement as I close ...

To forgive is to submit to God's sovereign and higher way so that He can lift us up to a greater height of spiritual life and ministry.

This is the Word of the Lord. Amen!