

How Many Times?

Focus: **Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** (Matthew 18:21-22)

What is the heaviest thing you have ever carried? Depending on the particular stage in your life, your answers will vary. For a school child, it may be one of those huge book bags filled with homework. For husbands, it may be their wife’s purse! For parents of little ones, it may be carrying a squirming child for a long distance. For someone who has lost a dear friend, it may be the weight of the casket as it is carried across the cemetery. All of these are very heavy things for us to carry and bear in our lives.

But as heavy as these things may be, there is something far heavier that we many times carry in our lives. The Joseph story helps us begin to see this heavy burden. Joseph was his father’s favorite son, the first-born of his beloved wife Rachel. His father Jacob spoiled Joseph in many ways. The Bible tells us that one time he gave his son a coat of many colors. Joseph was also one chosen by God for some great work on behalf of the Israelites. That work began to be known in some of Joseph’s dreams, especially as he dreamed that his eleven brothers would one day bow down before him. One day Jacob had an important task for Joseph. He sent him to find his brothers. As he traveled, it would be a dangerous journey because his relationship with his brothers was not very good. They felt he was a spoiled brat who loved to lord it over them. When he found his brothers, this was their reaction.

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. “Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” (Genesis 37:17b-20)

Reuben, the oldest of the brothers, was trying to do the right thing and protect Joseph. Instead of killing Joseph, Reuben suggested that he be placed in a cistern. Reuben’s plan was to come back later and rescue him. But while Reuben was gone, a group of Midianites came by on their way to Egypt. The brothers decided to sell Joseph to them which they did. When Reuben returned, the troubles really began. For now the burden Reuben had carried in his plan to rescue Joseph was replaced by an even

heavier burden, that of having to tell Jacob that his son was gone. Imagine the burden of this chain of events, and the burden it placed on Jacob himself.

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him. (Genesis 37:31-35)

Now the burden was multiplied as it not only was a burden for Jacob, but now also a burden for the sons as they saw what their actions had done for their father. Is there any heavier burden than this?

This account points out that there is an extremely heavy burden in our lives. It is the burden of sin that is unresolved and unforgiven. David spoke of the burden of sin when he wrote these words.

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me. Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. (Psalm 38:1-4)

That burden becomes much heavier when we are unwilling to address the sin. Joseph's brothers must have experienced some of the anguish of this burden of unforgiven sin. This is how David described it.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. (Psalm 32:3-4)

The brothers, in their silence about what really happened, would bear a heavy burden for many years. They would have received the blessing of forgiveness through their sacrifices to God, but we have to wonder if they received the blessing of forgiveness through confession of this sin against Joseph and Jacob.

This story has a good ending. Joseph would be reunited with the brothers at a time when there was a famine in the land. His time in Egypt was God's plan to provide food for Jacob and his family in a time of famine. Jacob rejoiced at seeing Joseph again, and then was able to die in peace. But at Jacob's death, there would be an end to the peace in the lives of the brothers. Now they lived with the

fear that Joseph would pay them back for what they had done to him. We can see that Joseph had every right to be like Peter and ask the question,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21b)

Instead, Joseph gave his brothers a great gift, the gift of forgiveness. This was his response to the brothers.

“Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:19-20)

Now the heavy burden is lifted. Three wonderful things take place in this process.

1. The sinners are set free!
2. The one who was offended is also set free!
3. God is glorified in this process!

Through Joseph and his brothers, God has given us a great plan for having heavy burdens lifted from our hearts and lives!

This continues to be a relevant topic in our personal lives and in our relationships in the congregation. There are a significant number of people who are unsuccessfully dealing with sins committed with each other. Some are like the brothers and have not confessed the sins to receive the blessing of forgiveness from the one offended. This leaves a heavy burden to carry throughout life. Others have perhaps sought forgiveness, only to encounter a person who is unwilling to forgive. The person who sinned once again has peace with God, even though there may not be peace with the offended brother. But for the one refusing to grant forgiveness, the burden becomes heavier and heavier with each passing day, week, month, and even year of life. These unresolved issues are a terrible burden that can weigh us down to the point of earthly death, and especially eternal death!

There is only one way for these situations to be resolved. There needs to be an outside mediator. That mediator must come to show us our sinfulness so that the burdens can then be removed from our

hearts and lives. Jesus is that mediator. He has come to take all of the heavy burdens from unforgiven situations from our lives and to take them on His life. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us,

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows... (Isaiah 53:4a)

To do this, Jesus must be present. He must be among people harboring grudges for many years. He must be among those who have become bitter with others and weighed down in the process. He must come among people who can never repay the debt they owe for the sins of unforgiveness. He must bring the only acceptable payment, the Unblemished Lamb of God which would be sacrificed to take away our sins. The sacrifice would take place on a cross. Simone of Cyrene was called upon to carry this cross. It must have seemed like a heavy burden for him, but it was a light burden compared to what Jesus would carry. He would carry the burden of our sins and receive the punishment of God for all of our sins. Even as He hung on the cross, Jesus was still extending love to the people as He very vividly answered Peter's question about how many times to forgive his brother. For from the cross Jesus answered Peter and each of us in our times when we are unwilling to forgive,

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. (Luke 23:34)

The heavy burdens of our sins have been lifted from us and placed on Jesus. In His death, all of those sins are destroyed and forgiven forever. As Jesus embraced the grave, God gave convincing proof that all was forgiven by raising Jesus from the dead! Now as those forgiven by Jesus, we have the promise that we will also have a day of resurrection, and will be granted a blessing of new life for all eternity!

There are some wonderful blessings that come from this forgiveness. These are indications of that new life given us through Christ. The first implication is that now we can truly understand that forgiveness isn't about counting, but is instead a quality of the heart. It isn't quantitative, but is qualitative. It is a focus on granting our brothers and sisters the continual forgiveness that we receive through faith in that divine act at the cross. It means we can continue to forgive again and again, just as Christ forgives us again and again. The new life through Jesus is described this way.

So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4)

We show our understanding of our own forgiveness each time we forgive our brother or sister, no matter how many times he or she may sin against us.

Secondly, forgiveness is about forgetting. When God forgives our sins, he no longer remembers them. The Prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant with God that shows us his plan.

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:34)

Just as God no longer remembers our sins when they are forgiven, so we also focus on having a bad memory of the offenses committed against us!

Finally, when someone forgives another person, we also forgive them. We take to heart the words of the Apostle Paul as he wrote,

If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven- if there was anything to forgive- I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake in order that Satan might not outwit us. (II Corinthians 2:10-11a)

When the offended party forgives, we also forgive. The sins are gone and forgotten. The blessings are given to the one offended and the one who gave the offense. God is glorified in all of this!

The Lord invites you to come to the cross with all your burdens. He has a great plan to lift them from you and set you free. He also has a great plan in our relationships with each other as he reminds us that as we practice the forgiveness of Christ, the person who sinned is set free, the person who was offended is set free, and God is glorified in all of this. Ultimately he answers that haunting question of Peter, **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?”** The answer is very clear: **AS MANY TIMES AS IT TAKES!**

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