

GENESIS 45:1-15 AND ROMANS 12:14-21

“VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY”, SAYS THE LORD. GOOD PEOPLE, AND CHRISTIANS IN PARTICULAR, STRIVE TO ABIDE BY THIS BIBLICAL MANDATE.

HOW OFTEN HAVE WE HEARD, IF NOT SAID OURSELVES THINGS LIKE: “HE’LL GET WHAT’S COMING TO HIM” “SHE’LL GET HERS IN THE END”.

THE QUESTION ARISES HOWEVER, WHAT IF GOD DOES NOT AVENGE US BUT INSTEAD FORGIVES THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED OR HURT US?

TO QUOTE SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET: “AYE THERE’S THE RUB”, OR IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH- THAT’S THE DANGER OF LEAVING OUR ENEMIES IN THE HANDS OF GOD.

AFTER ALL, JUST BECAUSE THE LORD CLAIMS THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO REVENGE, DOES NOT GUARANTEE THAT GOD WILL EXERCISE THAT RIGHT.

INDEED, IMPLIED IN GOD’S EXCLUSIVE RIGHT FOR VENGEANCE IS ALSO THE RIGHT NOT TO REPAY OR AVENGE. PERHAPS THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS THE BIBLE SPENDS MORE TIME TALKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS THAN VENGEANCE.

INDEED, CHRISTIANS IN PARTICULAR ARE EXPECTED TO REMEMBER AND ACCEPT GOD’S WILL THAT FORGIVENESS, AS WELL AS SALVATION, IS OFFERED TO ALL REPENTANT SINNERS THROUGH THE BLOOD OF CHRIST.

THIS MEANS IT IS EXTENDED TO THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST GOD AND US, AS WELL AS TO US WHEN WE SIN AGAINST GOD AND OTHERS.

HOWEVER, LET US NOT FORGET THAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT EXCLUSIVE TO THE NEW TESTAMENT.

THE OLD TESTAMENT RECORDS MANY TIMES GOD FORGAVE PEOPLE, SOMETIMES IMMEDIATELY, OTHER TIMES AFTER SOME PUNISHMENT.

AND OF COURSE TODAY’S STORY FROM GENESIS IS ABOUT HUMAN FORGIVENESS.

JACOB’S SON JOSEPH FOUND GREATER JOY BY FORGIVING HIS BROTHERS, THAN HE WOULD HAVE EXPERIENCED THROUGH REVENGING THE EVIL THEY DID TO HIM AND THEIR FATHER.

IT MAY NOT ALWAYS SEEM LIKE IT, BUT FORGIVENESS, AS SOMEONE ONCE SAID: “IS AT LEAST AS MUCH FOR OUR BENEFIT AS FOR THE OFFENDERS.”

TRULY WHEN WE ARE ABLE TO FORGIVE WE FREE NOT ONLY THE ONE WHO IS FORGIVEN, BUT ALSO OURSELVES FROM THE BONDS THAT ENSLAVE BOTH PARTIES TO THE WRONG THAT WAS DONE, AND THE WOUNDS WHICH WERE INFLICTED.

WE MUST NOT, HOWEVER MISTAKE THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS WITH EXCUSING THE OFFENCE, OR DENYING OUR HURT AND ANGER OVER THE OFFENCE THAT WAS COMMITTED.

INSTEAD, REAL FORGIVENESS IS OUR ABILITY TO MOVE BEYOND OUR FEELINGS TO HEALING WITHIN US.

AND HOPEFULLY THIS WILL INCLUDE HEALING IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE WE NEED TO FORGIVE.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, REAL FORGIVENESS ENABLES BOTH PARTIES TO MOVE ON.

THIS IS TRUE EMOTIONALLY AS WELL AS PHYSICALLY, AND TRUE WHETHER THEY STAY IN CONTACT OR GO THEIR SEPARATE WAYS.

IN FACT FORGIVENESS IS NOT THE CESSATION OF ANGER, BUT RATHER IT’S TRANSFORMATION.

YET, WHEN IT COMES TO DEEP HURT OR GREAT WRONGS- FORGIVING THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US IS NOT EASY.

ALEXANDER POPE CAPTURED THIS TRUTH IN HIS PHASE: “TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO FORGIVE DIVINE.”

UNFORTUNATELY THIS STATEMENT HAS BEEN USED SO OFTEN AS A CLICHÉ THAT MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY MISS THE PROFOUND THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE IMPLIED WITHIN IT.

THE MESSAGE IS- IF FORGIVENESS IS DIVINE, THEN IT IS NOT AN ACT OF WILL-POWER BUT AN OPERATION OF GRACE. IN OTHER WORDS- HUMANITY'S ABILITY TO FORGIVE COMES FROM GOD.

BUT THIS DOES NOT MEAN FORGIVENESS IS INSTANTANEOUS. IN FACT THE GREATER THE HURT THE MORE LIKELY WE FIND FORGIVENESS AS AN ONGOING PROCESS.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN THE OUR CONVICTIONS OR INTENSE EMOTIONS INTERFERE WITH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO BRING HEALING AND WHOLENESS.

BUT FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS, AND OF OURSELVES IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR OWN, AS WELL AS CHRIST'S CHURCH.

FOR EXAMPLE: CORRIE TEN BOOM, WAS A CHRISTIAN, WHO ALONG WITH HER SISTER , WAS IMPRISONED IN A NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP FOR HELPING TO RESCUE JEWS.

SHE CONFESSED THAT SHE STRUGGLED TO FORGIVE HER FORMER CAPTORS FOR THE DEATH OF HER SISTER AND OTHERS AND ALL THE SUFFERING EVERYONE IN THE CAMP ENDURED.

CORRIE TOLD HOW GOD ANSWERED HER PRAYER FOR HELP BY CONNECTING HER WITH A LUTHERAN PASTOR, WHO AFTER HEARING ABOUT HER STRUGGLES, GAVE THIS RESPONSE:

HE POINTED TO A BELL UP IN THE TOWER OF THE CHURCH AND EXPLAINED THAT THE BELL IS RUNG BY THE SEXTON PULLING ON THE ROPE.

HE FURTHER EXPLAINED THAT EVEN AFTER THE ROPE IS RELEASED THE BELL CONTINUES ON FOR A TIME TO RING, AS IT SWINGS BACK AND FORTH SLOWER AND SLOWER UNTIL FINALLY IT STOPS.

THEN HE SAID: "I BELIEVE THAT THE SAME THING IS TRUE OF FORGIVENESS. WHEN WE FORGIVE, WE TAKE OUR HAND OFF THE ROPE.

BUT IF WE HAVE BEEN TUGGING AT OUR GRIEVANCES FOR A LONG TIME, WE MUST NOT BE SURPRISED IF OLD ANGRY THOUGHTS KEEP COMING BACK FOR A WHILE. THEY ARE JUST THE DING DONG OF THE BELL SLOWING DOWN."

ANOTHER CHALLENGE SOME OF US FACE IS TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO GIVE ANOTHER PULL OR TWO ON THAT SAME ROPE, WHEN MEMORIES OF OUR HURT OR ANGER RESURFACES.

TODAY'S READING FROM GENESIS TELLS THE STORY OF JOSEPH FORGIVING HIS BROTHERS, EVEN AFTER SEEING THEM ONCE AGAIN BROUGHT TO LIFE OLD HURTS AND MEMORIES.

BUT THE CHAPTERS THAT PRECEDE THE READING DEMONSTRATE THAT EVEN JOSEPH HAD TO GROW IN GRACE BEFORE HE COULD REALLY FORGIVE THEM.

IN OTHER WORDS, JOSEPH KEPT HIS HAND ON THE ROPE FOR A WHILE, AND EVEN HAD TO TEST HIS BROTHERS BEFORE HE COULD FULLY FORGIVE THEM.

LAST WEEK WE HEARD HOW ANGER AND JEALOUSY CAUSED JOSEPH'S TEN OLDER BROTHERS TO SELL HIM INTO SLAVERY.

JOSEPH HOWEVER, WAS FORTUNATE TO FIND A KINDLY MASTER.

HE WAS ALSO GIFTED BY GOD WITH THE ABILITY TO WIN HIS MASTER'S RESPECT AND TRUST SO THAT HE ROSE IN POSITION.

UNFORTUNATELY HE LOST EVERYTHING WHEN HIS MASTER'S WIFE, AFTER FAILING TO SEDUCE JOSEPH, TOLD HER HUSBAND THE SLAVE TRIED TO RAPE HER. THIS LANDED HIM IN PRISON.

THINGS LOOKED HOPELESS UNTIL JOSEPH WAS JOINED BY TWO OF PHARAOH'S SERVANTS WHO, WHILE IN PRISON, HAD STRANGE DREAMS THAT HE WAS ABLE TO INTERPRET.

ONE MAN'S DREAM FORETOLD HE WOULD BE EXECUTED AND THE OTHER'S THAT HE WOULD BE FORGIVEN AND RESTORED TO HIS POSITION. BOTH OF JOSEPH'S PREDICTIONS CAME TRUE.

A FEW YEARS LATER WHEN PHARAOH HAD DREAMS NO ONE COULD UNDERSTAND THE SERVANT REMEMBERED JOSEPH, AND BROUGHT HIM TO THE ATTENTION OF THE KING OF EGYPT.

AND AS THE SAYING GOES: "THE REST IS HISTORY", BECAUSE JOSEPH BECAME SECOND IN POWER ONLY TO PHARAOH.

THEN MANY YEARS LATER FAMINE STRUCK, BUT EGYPT, UNDER JOSEPH'S HAND HAD GRAIN STORED FOR SUCH A TIME. THIS WAS WHY JACOB SENT HIS 10 OLDEST SONS TO BUY SOME.

NATURALLY JOSEPH'S BROTHERS DID NOT RECOGNIZED HIM, BUT HE KNEW WHO THEY WERE.

AND WHILE FEELING SOME LOVE FOR THEM, HE NEEDED TO TEST THEM BEFORE HE WAS ABLE TO FORGIVE WHAT THEY HAD DONE.

JOSEPH DISCOVERED THAT HIS BROTHERS HAD CHANGED OVER THE YEARS, SHOWING REMORSE FOR THEIR PAST.

THEY ALSO SOUGHT ABOVE ALL ELSE TO PROTECT THEIR YOUNGER BROTHER BENJAMIN, WHO HAD THE SAME MOTHER AS JOSEPH.

YOU SEE, AFTER JACOB THOUGHT JOSEPH WAS DEAD, HE CLUNG TO BENJAMIN AS HIS LINK TO HIS BELOVED WIFE RACHAEL WHO HAD DIED.

WHEN THE BROTHERS RETURNED, THIS TIME BRINGING BENJAMIN, JOSEPH THREATENED TO KEEP THE YOUNG MAN AS A SLAVE.

BUT JUDAH, WHOSE IDEA IT WAS TO SELL JOSEPH INTO SLAVERY, OFFERED HIMSELF IN PLACE OF BENJAMIN.

AFTER HIS HEARTFELT PLEA, JOSEPH COULD NO LONGER CONTAIN HIMSELF, AND AS WE HEARD THIS MORNING HE FORGAVE HIS BROTHERS AND REVEALED HIS TRUE IDENTITY.

HE THEN UTTERED THE GREAT THEOLOGICAL TRUTH OF THIS STORY- A TRUTH THAT PERHAPS JOSEPH HIMSELF HAD JUST COME TO UNDERSTAND.

THAT TRUTH WAS FOUND IN JOSEPH'S REALIZATION THAT GOD HAD SENT HIM TO EGYPT IN ORDER TO SAVE MANY LIVES.

INDEED THROUGH JOSEPH, GOD PRESERVED THE COVENANT AND PASSED IT ON TO ALL TWELVE SONS OF JACOB AND THEIR FAMILIES.

FORGIVENESS ENABLED JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS TO MOVE FORWARD INSTEAD OF RETURNING AGAIN AND AGAIN TO THE PAST.

CONSIDER THIS: THERE ARE TWO CREATURES THAT WE MAY USE AS SYMBOLS OF FORGIVENESS-THEY ARE THE EMU AND THE KANGAROO. BY THEIR PHYSICAL NATURES THIS BIRD AND THIS MAMMAL CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD, NOT BACK.

THE EMU'S THREE-TOED FOOT CAUSES IT TO FALL IF IT TRIES TO GO BACKWARDS AND THE KANGAROO'S LARGE TAIL PREVENTS IT FROM MOVING IN REVERSE. LIKewise FORGIVENESS MOVES US FORWARD.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED IN THE STORY OF JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS.

HIS ACT OF FORGIVENESS PERMITTED THEM ALL TO GET ON WITH THEIR LIVES AND ENABLED GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION TO MOVE FORWARD.

AND AS MUCH AS PEOPLE MAY SAY THEY CAN'T GO ON WITH THEIR LIVES UNLESS THE WRONG THEY SUFFERED IS AVENGED- VENGEANCE PULLS US BACK TO RELIEVE OUR PAST.

FORGIVENESS, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS THE HEALING BALM THAT TAKES US INTO THE FUTURE.

JOSEPH HAS BEEN DESCRIBED, BY SOME, AS THE MOST CHRIST-LIKE PERSON IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

THE REASON IS- BECAUSE THROUGH HIS LIFE OF SUFFERING, AND VICTORY, GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION WAS ADVANCED.

THUS JOSEPH, IN A UNIQUE, BUT MUCH LESSER WAY, PREFIGURES THE GREATER SUFFERING AND VICTORY OF THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS.

FOR, IT WAS BY THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS GOD PLANTED IN JOSEPH'S HEART, THAT A NEW BEGINNING FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD WAS FORGED.

LEWIS SMEDES, WHO WROTE A BOOK ABOUT FORGIVENESS, OFFERS THIS REFLECTION ON THE SUBJECT:

“THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS IS THE CREATION OF A NEW BEGINNING.

IT DOESN'T ALWAYS TAKE AWAY THE HURT. IT DOESN'T IGNORE THE PAST INJURY, IT MERELY REFUSES TO LET THEM STAND IN THE WAY OF A NEW START.”

THIS WAS WHAT JESUS WAS DOING WHEN FROM THE CROSS HE IMploRED HIS FATHER TO FORGIVE ALL WHO HAD CAUSED HIS SUFFERING AND DEATH.

JESUS WAS NOT ASKING GOD TO FORGET WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM, INDEED TO FORGET CHRIST'S SUFFERING AND DEATH WOULD BE TO DEFEAT THE PURPOSE OF HIS INCARNATION IN THE FIRST PLACE.

GOD, IN FACT, NEEDS TO REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO JESUS FOR OUR SAKES.

GOD THE FATHER NEEDS TO REMEMBER- SO THAT THROUGH HIS SON'S SUFFERING, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION, WE CAN RECEIVE COMPLETE AND TOTAL FORGIVENESS.

AND IT IS THE FORGIVENESS OF ALL OUR SINS, THAT BRINGS THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO- HELP US BECOME A NEW CREATION THROUGH CHRIST.

MORE THAN ANY OTHER APOSTLE, PAUL WROTE ABOUT THE BEGINNING, THE NEW LIFE, THE NEW CREATION, AND THE NEW RELATIONSHIP WE HAVE WITH GOD, THROUGH CHRIST JESUS

ONE OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE PAUL EXPLAINED TO THE CHURCH IN ROME, IS TO LIVE A FORGIVEN LIFE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

HE TEACHES US THAT BY DOING SO WE WILL ALSO FULFILL JESUS' COMMANDMENT TO LOVE GOD, OTHERS, AND OURSELVES.

THE LOVE OF JESUS IS MADE MANIFEST IN OUR LIVES BY OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS (AND OURSELVES), FOR IN THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS WE TREAT OTHERS AS GOD IN CHRIST TREATS US.

PAUL'S WORDS TO THE CHURCH IN ROME TEACHES BELIEVERS WAYS IN WHICH THEY CAN EXHIBIT TO THE WORLD THE FORGIVENESS, AND NEW LIFE THEY HAVE AS CHRISTIANS.

THESE INSTRUCTIONS ARE ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, AND THE REDEMPTION HIS SACRIFICE WINS FOR ALL WHO ACCEPT THE GRACIOUS GIFT OF SALVATION.

MAY WE ALL WELCOME GOD'S GRACE THROUGH CHRIST, TO GROW IN OUR ABILITY TO OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD. AMEN

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