

The Burden of Guilt – Genesis 50:15-21

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Lumber Mill*

1. A young preacher, fresh out of seminary, had just arrived his first church.
2. It was a small church in a town where almost everyone worked at the local lumber mill.
3. This mill & town were in *fierce competition* with the next town & mill just upstream.
4. The preacher had only been there a few days when he saw something that disturbed him greatly.
 - a. he was taking a walk through the woods and saw some of the workers at the local mill pulling logs branded for the *other* mill out of the stream,
 - b. cutting off the branded ends, and running them through their own mill.
5. The preacher was deeply distressed with this and so worked the rest of the week on a powerful sermon.
6. That Sunday he got up and preached a message entitled “Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Property.”
 - a. the sermon seemed to go over well.
 - b. everyone told him, as they went out the door, just how much they loved his preaching.
 - c. “You really moved me preacher. / Best sermon I ever heard,” were some of the remarks they made.
7. But the next Monday morning, it was business as usual at the mill. They were still stealing logs.
8. So the next Sunday the preacher delivered a real “pulpit-pounder” titled “Thou Shalt Not Steal.”
 - a. again there was an enthusiastic response;
 - b. “Fantastic!” the people told him. “Wonderful!” they cried.
9. But on Monday morning the other company's logs were still being swiped by the town mill.
10. The preacher said to himself, “Enough is enough!”
11. The following Sunday he got up and preached on the topic, “Thou Shalt Not Cut the Branded Ends Off Someone Else's Logs!”

12. They ran him out of town!

B. Today – Guilt

1. We're looking at the subject of guilt & forgiveness this morning.
2. This is an area the Lord seems to be *highlighting* for us as a church right now.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 15-17

15When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him."

1. We need to first set the scene for this story.
 - a. Joseph had been sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt 40 years before.
 - b. but God had blessed Joseph and through a difficult path had eventually elevated him to the role of Prime Minister of all of Egypt, the world's most powerful kingdom of the time.
 - c. it was in this capacity that his brothers appeared before him, having come from their home in Canaan to secure food during a time of severe famine.
 - d. Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, showered them with favor, and told them there were going to be 5 more years of famine and the best move would be to migrate South and live in Egypt where there were sufficient stores of grain to ensure their survival.
 - e. so the entire family relocate to the region of Goshen in Egypt.
 - f. after living there for 17 years, Jacob, the father and patriarch of the family finally passed away –
 - g. and the brothers grew fearful that now that he was gone, Joseph, the brother they had treated so wrongly 40 YEARS BEFORE, would now move to exact his revenge.
 - h. these men had come to believe it was only their father's oversight of the family that had stayed Joseph's hand from falling on them to *get even* for their ill-treatment of him so many years before.
 - i. they thought that Joseph had *withheld* his revenge because it

- might bring him into *disfavor* with the father he loved so dearly.
- j. but with Pops out of the way – there was nothing keeping him from getting even.

16 So they sent *messengers* to Joseph, saying, “Before your father died he commanded, saying, ¹⁷“Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.”” Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

2. The brothers sent a message to Joseph who lived in the Egyptian capital.
 - a. this message was presented as if it was actually *from his father Jacob*.
 - b. it said, “I plead with you – forgive your brothers.”
3. When Joseph received the message, he broke down!
 - a. he *knew* it had been fabricated by his brothers.
 - b. in chs. 47 & 48, we’re told that Joseph had already had some private meetings with his father.
 - 1) Jacob had used those meetings to convey what he *wanted* and *needed* to say to Joseph.
 - 2) Jacob knew his days were swiftly winding down and that he could die at any time so he’d been diligent to tell Joseph what had to be said.
 - 3) and in none of those conversations had Jacob said anything to Joseph about forgiving his brothers.
 - 4) the reason why was because Jacob KNEW JOSEPH! He knew he’d already forgiven them – it was a done deal!
4. What so *crushed* Joseph when he received this made-up message from his brothers, was that they did not see what their father had – that Joseph’s forgiveness of them was sincere and complete!
5. They were *still* fearful, *after 17 years!* that given the chance, Joseph would wail on them.
6. They were consumed with guilt for what they had done, and that guilt had grown into fear.
7. Then the fear had transformed itself into a deceit that would move them to put such lying words into the mouth of their dead

father.

8. When Joseph received this message, not only did it reveal their guilt, fear and deceit, it cast in doubt the sincerity of the relationship he'd had with his brothers for the last 17 years!
 - a. think about it – that they would send this message *now* that Jacob is dead, means that all along they'd *doubted* Joseph's *intentions*!
 - b. and if they truly believed Joseph was just waiting to get even with them, would they have wanted to maintain a relationship with him?
 - c. No! So the only reason they *had* maintained a relationship with Joseph was out of *fear*, and because of his power as the Prime Minister of Egypt who had absolute control over their lives!
 - d. Joseph knew that from the perspective of his brothers, the last 17 years had been nothing but a pretense, a sham!
9. The sudden awareness of this broke his heart!
 - a. you see, Joseph truly HAD forgiven them!
 - b. what he *longed for* and treasured so deeply was relationship with his brothers.
 - c. he'd come to the place in his life of absolute trust in the Lord and His providence.
 - d. and that meant that though his brothers may have indeed treated him wrongly,
 - e. ultimately God was in control and would turn what they meant to His sovereign and good purposes.
 - f. in fact, that's *exactly* what Joseph said to them –

B. Vs. 18-21

- 18**Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we *are* your servants.”
- 19**Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? **20**But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. **21**Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke

kindly to them.

1. Having sent the fake message on ahead of them, the brothers then arrived and set themselves before Joseph in a posture of total submission.
2. It was then that Joseph told them the truth – even *before* they ever came to Egypt 17 years earlier and first asked for food, he'd forgiven them!
3. Yes, what they'd done was an evil and wicked thing; but Joseph did not, and had not held it against them.
4. He had no interest at all in exacting revenge on them.
5. Why? Because he'd learned an important lesson in the years he'd spent in slavery and prison and now as the ruler of Egypt – God Is In Control, and turns what the devil and rebel man means for evil into good!
6. What so distressed Joseph about his brothers, what so troubled him about their message and now their appearing before him was the guilt and fear it revealed.
 - a. for nearly 2 decades he'd done nothing but shower them with blessing and acceptance.
 - b. yet they kept looking at their *own sin and failure* rather than at the *evidences* of Joseph's forgiveness.
 - c. they had lived inside their own self-imposed emotional prison because of guilt.
 - d. in selling their brother into slavery – it was they who ended up the slaves, the prisoners.

C. The Lesson

1. This story from the life of Jacob's sons teaches us a powerful lesson about guilt and forgiveness.
2. The parallels between Joseph and Christ are simply amazing; he stands out clearly as an OT type and picture of Lord. Consider just a *few* of the ways Joseph foreshadows Jesus . . .
 - a. He was the *beloved son* of his father.
 - b. He was the *favoured son* of Israel.
 - c. He was a shepherd.
 - d. He prophesied his coming glory.
 - e. He came to His brethren, but they rejected him.
 - f. He went to Egypt.

- g. - Was made a servant.
 - h. - Was shown to have divine wisdom.
 - i. - Was recognized as having the Spirit of God.
 - j. - Was betrayed by friends.
 - k. He was sold for 30 pieces of silver.
 - l. He was handed over to the Gentiles.
 - m. He was tempted severely, but did not sin.
 - n. - Was falsely accused.
 - o. - Made no defense.
 - p. - Was cast into prison, and numbered with sinners and criminals.
 - q. He endured unjust punishment from Gentiles.
 - r. He was associated with two criminals; one was pardoned and one was not.
 - s. He was regarded as dead, but was raised out of the pit.
 - t. He was glorified after his humility.
 - u. He was honored among Gentiles while still despised or forgotten by his brethren
 - v. He was given a Gentile bride
 - w. He was 30 years old when he began his life's work.
 - x. He blessed the world with bread.
 - y. The world was instructed to go to him and do whatever he said to do
 - z. And he was given the name Zaphnath Paaneah - "Savior of the World"
3. And just like Jesus, Joseph had *fully forgiven* his brothers in his longing to be restored to fellowship with them.
 4. How like those brothers *we* all too often are!
 - a. though God forgives us completely in Christ,
 - b. we continue to carry the guilt of our sin long *after* we ought to have laid it down!
 5. For how many of us this morning, is our fellowship with the Lord *hindered* all because we don't *really* trust Him?
 - a. there's a nagging little thought that just won't go away that says,
 - b. "God's really going to whoop us when He gets the chance."
 - c. we're like Joseph's brothers who for 17 years enjoyed the evidence of Joseph's forgiveness,
 - d. but couldn't shake the feeling that it was really all a set-up; that

he was just gaining their trust, and once they finally and fully let go, *then* he'd get 'em.

6. Their error was in *looking at their sin*, at the evil they'd done to Joseph, *rather than* at what he *said and did* about it.
 - a. they knew what they'd done was a heinous act of treachery, and they were *right* to be convicted of it.
 - b. but they were *wrong* in not accepted his forgiveness.
 - c. friends, there was nothing more Joseph could do to prove he'd forgiven them.
 - d. they simply needed to *accept* it – it was an issue of trusting him!
7. Notice how they went about attempting to massage their sense of guilt and overcome the fear it produced. V. 18 . . .

Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we are your servants."

- a. they present themselves to Joseph, and offer to *work* off their debt to him.
 - b. this is ever and always the *route-to-relief* guilt produces in us.
 - c. if we do not accept forgiveness *by faith*, trusting that God has forgiven us, based solely on what He says and does,
 - d. then we design our *own* route to forgiveness.
 - e. guilt is a heavy burden, one too great to bear, and we will do just about anything to deal and cope with it.
8. In fact, the whole field of modern secular psychology arose as an attempt to deal with the problem of guilt.
 - a. it's the general consensus of psychologists that guilt is man's biggest problem!
 - b. and that in his attempt to deal with it, he's developed all kinds of mental and emotional problems.
 - c. people work desperately at trying to expunge from their soul the profound awareness that they don't measure up to some universal standard of right and wrong.
 - d. they know they've come short and the guilt haunts them.
 - e. in a recent poll adults were asked that they felt most guilty about. The top 4 responses were:
 - 4) Not spending time with friends/family 12%
 - 3) Taking poor care of their health 12%
 - 2) Spending too much money 15%
 - 1) With 34%; people said that they felt *most* guilty about,

“Nothing in particular.”

- f. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle decided to play a practical joke on a dozen of his friends & sent each of them a telegram that read, “Flee at once! All is discovered.” Within 24 hours, all 12 had left the country.
9. So, how does most psychotherapy attempt to deal with this colossal sense of guilt?
 - a. it tells the guilt-ridden that their standards are too high.
 - b. it questions the nature of truth, and tells each patient that he/she is his/her own standard; we set our own rules.
10. And now, as a society, we’re seeing the bitter fruit of this evil counsel in the promotion and acceptance of wicked and immoral lifestyles.
11. Man *feels* guilt, because he IS guilty!
 - a. he’s broken God’s Law – he’s a sinner.
 - b. what he needs, isn’t someone to tell him his sin isn’t really sin –
 - c. what he needs is deliverance from both the sin and the guilt it produces.
12. This is what the gospel is all about!
 - a. God doesn’t *lower* the standard – He raises us to and over it in Christ!
 - b. Jesus died to pay the debt our sin incurs.
 - c. by believing in Christ, God forgives us – just as Joseph had forgiven his brothers!
 - d. and just like his brothers, you and I must *accept by faith* that we’re forgiven.
13. But there’s a difference between God’s & Joseph’s forgiveness!
 - a. it is possible that Joseph *could* have been settling them up.
 - b. he *could* have been only *acting* kind to them, gaining their trust and preparing an elaborate plot to exact his revenge.
 - c. he *wasn’t* doing this, but he *could* have been, and that is in fact what his brothers thought was happening.
 - d. the difference between Joseph and God is this – GOD CANNOT BE SETTING US UP FOR REVENGE – because God *cannot lie*, and He’s said that He forgives us, totally and completely in Christ!
14. Listen to this well know promise in 1 John 1:9 -
If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- a. it's crucial we *understand* and then *embrace* what John says here.
 - b. he presents a *condition* – “**If** we confess our sins”
 - c. and a *result* – “He is faithful and just to forgive us”
 - d. the *condition* of our forgiveness is our *confession*.
 - e. Frederick II was an 18th century Prussia king,
 - 1) he visited a prison in Berlin where the inmates tried to prove to him how they had been unjustly imprisoned. All except one.
 - 2) that one man sat quietly in a corner, while all the rest protested their innocence.
 - 3) Seeing him sitting there oblivious to the commotion, the king asked him what he was there for.
 - 4) the man replied, “Armed robbery, Your Honor.”
 - 5) the king asked, “Were you guilty?”
 - 6) he said, “Yes, Sir. I entirely deserve my punishment.”
 - 7) the king then gave an order to the guard: “Release this guilty man. I don't want him corrupting all these innocent people.”
 - f. this illustrates what 1 John 1:9 says
 - 1) to *confess* means *to agree with*
 - 2) when we confess our sins to God, we are agreeing with Him about what *He* says about them!
 - 3) and what does God say about our sin?
 - a) it's wrong and deserving of judgment
 - b) but that isn't all we agree with,
 - c) for what has God promised to *do* with our sin *when* we confess it?
 - d) He's promised to forgive it!
 - c) so – there's two sides to confession of sin.
 -) the first side is *admitting* its evil and our moral guilt.
 -) the second side is *accepting* God's forgiveness and agreeing with what He says about it – that the debt is expunged in Christ's work on the cross!
 -) to Jesus's “It is finished!” we say, “AMEN! Thank You Lord!”
15. Therefore, is it right or proper for the Christian to carry guilt?
- a. should the believer walk around with the sense of being in a place of condemnation?
 - b. should we look back over our lives with regret at the stupid and foolish things we've done?

- c. if we do, aren't we like Joseph's foolish brothers?
- d. and doesn't it break the heart of God, just as it broke Joseph's?
- 16. Friends, we must take our eyes off our sin and put them on God!
- 17. He is bigger than our sin, and greater than our guilt.
- 18. Listen to it again -

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- 19. Release from guilt, forgiveness for our sin comes, comes not by trying to *prove ourselves worthy* of forgiveness, as Joseph's brothers did.
- 20. It comes by looking at the goodness of God and accepting what He says, by faith!
- 21. There's a precious promise in 1 John 1:9 many miss.
 - a. John says – “If we confess our sins,” meaning the *ones we're aware of*, the ones the Holy Spirit has convicted us of and that we sense proper grief and guilt over,
 - b. then, “He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins,” meaning those specific sins that we've just confessed.
 - c. but what about the sins we've committed that for whatever reason we're not aware of? What about those?
 - d. John adds, “and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
 - e. as we walk in the light of the Holy Spirit and are readily confessing our *known* sins, then we abide in a *place of forgiveness* that covers even the sins we aren't aware of.
 - f. John makes this even clearer in v. 7 when he writes

If we walk in the light as He is in the light, . . . the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

D. Free From Condemnation

- 1. We have a spiritual adversary who has a very narrow playbook.
- 2. Really, he doesn't need a lot of variation in the strategies he uses because the few he has are so effective and we fall for them again and again.
- 3. One of his chief deceits is to tempt us to sin by telling us everyone else is doing it and besides, it's not really all that bad.
- 4. When we listen to this lie and give in, then he turns right around and beats us over the head with guilt!

- a. in first tempting us – he tells us that what God says about *sin* isn't true,
 - b. then when we yield to the temptation, he tells us what God says about *forgiveness* isn't true.
 - c. he's a liar He's a liar. He's a liar!
5. Joseph could do NOTHING MORE to prove his sincerity in having forgiven his brothers – they just needed to accept it!
 6. God can do nothing more in proving His sincerity in forgiving us – the Cross is all the proof we need!
 7. Romans 8:1 says,
There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.
 8. Think of all the years Joseph's brothers missed out on the benefits they could have enjoyed had they simply accepted his forgiveness.
 - a. Joseph was the prime minister of the world's mightiest nation!
 - b. they could have enjoyed rank and privilege beyond their wildest dreams!
 - c. but their lack of faith and acceptance of forgiveness created a distance and alienation in their hearts that limited their ability to enjoy the blessings and privilege that was theirs!
 - d. when they had arrived in Egypt, Pharaoh told Joseph to promote any among his brothers who were ready, to positions of influence among his flocks and herds.
 - e. we never read that Joseph did. His brothers held back and never made themselves available to such promotion.
 - f. think of what they lost because of their useless sense of guilt!
 9. How many in this room this morning could be used by God to great effect but aren't because they carry false guilt and so disqualify themselves?
 10. How many here this morning are missing out on the intimacy with God that's the very essence and joy of life, all because they are weighed down with guilt and fear and see God as laying an elaborate plot to secure their trust - just so in the end He can get 'em?

III. CONCLUSION

A. Another Troubling Thought

1. There's another troubling reason why the brothers so misunderstood and judged Joseph.
2. More than likely, they thought he'd get them now that Jacob was gone, because if the shoe was on the other foot, it's what *they* would do!
3. We tend to attribute to others the motives that in fact, are in our own hearts.
4. And as they looked at the situation, they couldn't help but suspect that now that Jacob was gone and Joseph didn't have to worry about hurting his old man, he'd certainly move to get even.
5. They thought that, because if they were in Joseph's place, it's what they would do.
6. And once again, we see the evidence and truth of our study two weeks ago, that the apprehension of our *forgiveness* is directly tied to our *forgiving*.
7. To be forgiven, means to forgive; the two go hand in hand and cannot be separated.
8. Two reactions came from that message on forgiveness I gave two weeks ago.
 - a. one reaction was a deep appreciation and acceptance of the counsel of scripture.
 - 1) several people said it was a spiritual breakthrough for them,
 - 2) and that it had worked a tremendous freedom and healing.
 - 3) the Lord used it to heal many broken relationships, not only between people, but also with Him.
 - b. the other reaction from a few was *resistance*;
 - 1) there were deep hurts they'd suffered and resentments they held they didn't like being challenged on.
 - 2) they felt a certain *right & justification* for their *lack of forgiveness*.
9. I don't know what to say to this except – and I say it with the utmost tenderness & compassion for the pain you've known – *Repent!*
 - a. your unforgiveness is *itself a sin* because God calls you to forgive as you *have been forgiven*.
 - b. the hurt & offense done you, you *continue to give power to* by your *refusal* to forgive.
 - c. we overcome sin by *releasing* it, not by holding on to it!

- d. unforgiveness is a self-imposed prison that blocks us from enjoying the healing & blessing of God.

B. Freedom

1. When we read this story and see Joseph's brothers failure to appropriate the forgiveness he so readily held out to them, we see it for the tragedy that it is.
2. The awesome example of grace he so freely showed was left unclaimed!
3. So let's end with this – is that story duplicated in any of us this morning?
4. Do you carry the guilt for sins God has forgiven in Christ?
5. Let me end with this final illustration.
 - a. amputees often experience some sensation of a *phantom limb*.
 - b. somewhere, locked in their brains, a memory lingers of the nonexistent arm or leg.
 - c. they will say that even though the limb has been cut off, they still feel an itch or pain there.
 - d. Dr. Barwick was an administrator in a medical school who developed a serious circulatory problem in one of his legs.
 - 1) it grew quite painful and he was told he ought to have it removed.
 - 2) but he refused until the pain became unbearable.
 - 3) the entire time he kept saying how much he hated that leg, and finally agreed to have it amputated.
 - 4) now, normally, they just dispose of amputated limbs in the incinerator,
 - 5) but Dr. Barwick asked to keep his leg; he had it put in formaldehyde in a special jar and placed it on the mantle over his fireplace.
 - 6) he thought it would be fun to mock it.
 - 7) but Dr. Barwick suffered a terrible fate – the amputated leg *mocked him!*
 - 8) though it was no longer attached, the pain & hatred he'd invested in for so long had lodged in his brain, and he suffered the worst case of phantom limb pain.
 - 9) the wound was healed, but he could still feel the torture, even though it was not real!

- e. phantom limb pain provides great insight into the problem of false guilt.
 - 1) Christians can be obsessed by the memory of some sin committed years ago.
 - 2) It never leaves them, crippling them, their fellowship with God, and their relationships with others.
 - 3) They live in fear that someone will discover their past.
 - 4) They work overtime trying to prove to God they're truly repentant.
 - 5) They erect a barrier against the loving grace of God because they have allowed their sin to eclipse Him.
- 6. To all such false guilt – God has one answer: Jesus said, “It is finished!”
- 7. Is it or isn't it?