



You Can Forgive Your Parents

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Parents are becoming a common scapegoat, at least in many American circles. Listen to people explain their weaknesses and failures in life, and consider how often you hear them blame their parents — directly or indirectly, blatantly or subtly. We've all heard that the sins of the parents are passed down to their children and their children's children (Exodus 34:6–7). We've also been told over and over that most of our weaknesses as people can be traced to weaknesses in our parents and their parenting. How much of the trouble you have experienced in life do you (consciously or unconsciously) attribute to your parents (or other family members) — to things they withheld from you, to lessons they hadn't learned yet, to character flaws in them that haven't changed, to mistakes they made in raising you, to sins they committed against you? It can be healthy to uncover the roots of our specific pains or weaknesses — biological, historical, or otherwise — but true healing will never come from identifying causes or assigning guilt, but from trusting God.

Betrayed by Family

Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers, *all* eleven of his brothers (Genesis 37:18, 28). Eleven of the people he should have been able to trust most in the world, instead conspired first to kill him (Genesis 37:18), and then to sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:28).

Perhaps a brother or sister (or father or mother) could do worse to you, but most of our family members are not capable of horrors like these. They plotted to murder him, then left him in a hole to die, then pulled him out of the pit, opting instead to make a little money by selling him into some unknown, lifelong slavery. They had no idea where they were sending their brother. They simply rejoiced that they were finally rid of him, despite how devastating the news would be to their father.

Not You, But God

Years later, God had brought Joseph through slavery into power, then through unjust imprisonment into greater power under Pharaoh. Because of a severe famine in the land, Joseph's family came from Canaan to buy food in Egypt. As God would have it, they unknowingly landed at their betrayed brother's feet, begging in desperation for their lives.

Joseph recognized his brothers immediately, all of them guilty of attempted murder and human trafficking. Suddenly, he was now not only their victim, but also their judge. The story plays out through several interactions between them, but climaxes as Joseph finally reveals his identity to the men. They're immediately distraught, knowing the evil they have done and realizing the severe punishment they deserved (Genesis 45:3). Joseph's next words to them are some of the most stunning in all the Bible:

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." (Genesis 45:4–5)

No, Joseph, don't you have the history wrong here? *Your brothers* sold you into slavery, and sent you to die in Egypt. Yet Joseph repeats himself, "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8).

God Meant It for Good

Seventeen years later, their father Jacob died. The brothers feared Joseph might finally get his revenge against them (Genesis 50:15). In their minds, he was still right to seek retribution, despite the forgiveness and kindness he had extended to them.

Joseph wept with compassion and affection, and then said,

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” (Genesis 50:19–21)

Instead of confronting his would-be murderers, he comforted them. Instead of punishing the men who sold him into slavery, he promised to provide for them and their children. He laid aside the awful weight of resentment and bitterness, and cast his crushing, nightmarish cares upon God (1 Peter 5:7). When his brothers deserved a curse, he chose instead to bless them — taking up his cross for the joy God had set before him.

His surprising patience and kindness with his brothers rings with the apostle Peter’s description of Sarah. When her own husband lied and put her in danger, she “[did] good and [did] not fear anything that is frightening” (1 Peter 3:6). She entrusted herself to God, even when she couldn’t entrust herself to Abraham. Joseph entrusted himself — and his brothers — to God, not needing to execute justice or seek vindication himself.

Do you have the faith to forgive your family — your parents (Ephesians 4:32)? Do you have the freedom to let God deal with their offenses against you (Romans 12:19)? Do you have the courage to receive and live the good God has planned for you, however good or bad it might feel in the moment (Romans 8:28)?

Good Deeper Than Pain

Joseph knew God was always working something deeper *for him* than the betrayal, the slavery, and the imprisonment — a sweetness deeper than any circumstance. But he also saw his suffering in the context of what God was doing for others.

- “God sent me before you *to preserve life*” (Genesis 45:5, 7).
- To his brothers: “I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, *so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty*” (Genesis 45:11).
- “God meant it for good, to bring it about *that many people should be kept alive*” (Genesis 50:20).

Maybe the greatest earthly good God will do through the things you have suffered will be in someone else’s life, and not your own. As Paul writes, “[Blessed be the] God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, *so that* we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

None of us asks for that kind of ministry, but it is a beautiful and necessary ministry, to which God calls many. Joseph counted all of his suffering worth it compared with all God did through it for others — every malicious intent in his brothers, every act of mistreatment in slavery, every unjust day in jail. Do you treasure the good God does for others through you that much?

God’s Plan for You

Christian, your parents did not get in the way of God’s plans for you. They *were* God’s plan for you. Can you look back at your life, with Joseph, and say that? *Ultimately, my parents did not send me here; God sent me here. Whatever my parents meant for me, God meant it for good.* He did, he is, and he will — in every hardship and in every relationship.

Joseph did not live for his brothers’ apologies. Their sins against him did not hold him captive all those years, refusing to let him move on. He knew the horrors of captivity well, but he was free from bitterness and resentment, even while his brothers were

silent about their guilt. Don't wait for your parents to apologize before you exercise the freedom Christ has already purchased for you.

Even if they have plotted to murder you or to sell you into slavery, *even then* they cannot keep God from doing good *to you*, and *through you* for others.