



## **Day 3: Forgive and Heal**

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### **Genesis 50:15–21**

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<sup>15</sup> Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" <sup>16</sup> So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup> "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup> So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

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Forgiveness is not just some nebulous vague idea that one can easily dismiss. It has to do with uniting people through practical politics. Without forgiveness there is no future.

*These are the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, for whom the power of forgiveness was a central force in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.*

The story of Joseph and his brothers is the story of how the deep rift between them is healed. It is also a story about the power of forgiveness in both a personal and a political context. The question this story raises is, How does forgiveness heal the rift between Joseph and his brothers?

## When the father dies

The context of this episode is the death of the father, Jacob. Before Jacob dies he blesses each one of his sons. His dying wish is to be buried with his ancestors in the cave in the field of Machpelah in Canaan (Gen 49:29–33).

Joseph's close bond with his father is reflected in the fact that Joseph "threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him" (Gen 50:1). Joseph disregards the idea that the body may be unclean or that people might consider this Egyptian ruler weak if he weeps in public. Joseph loves his father deeply, a fact that is not lost on Joseph's brothers.

A common feature of death scenes is a reconciliation between a father and his children. Given the long history of broken relations between Jacob and his sons, we might have expected that Jacob would have called his sons together to make peace with them. Instead, he blesses each son with words that correspond to their character, a

character that will determine their future. The tensions between Joseph and his brothers remains unresolved at the father's death bed.

## At the funeral

When families are torn apart, funerals can be painful. Family members may be nice to each other for the sake of the deceased. Jacob's funeral was a national event. Joseph provided for his father a period of mourning, and a funeral procession fitting for an Egyptian leader. Joseph is clearly in charge, even though he is not the oldest son. The funeral is a display of his political authority in Egypt.

After the body was embalmed, and the forty days of mourning observed, Joseph led a massive procession of Egyptian leaders, including their chariots and the entire extended family of Jacob (less the children), back to Canaan for the burial (Gen 50:1–14). And, as the writer notes, the Canaanites were duly impressed by this grand Egyptian funeral in their midst. Joseph had made his father proud.

What appears to be the brothers' role in this grand affair?

## After the funeral

Once the funeral is over and the family returns home, the brothers recognize only too well their new reality.

What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him? (Gen 50:15).

Does Jacob contribute to the conflict between Joseph and his brothers? If so, how? How do children feel about each other when a parent loves one more than others and gives them a greater inheritance?

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**Bearing a grudge:** the verb for “bearing a grudge” does not occur often in Hebrew. It appears in one significant passage that may be connected with this text. Esau “held a grudge” against Jacob because Isaac had given Jacob the blessing. Esau says that he will wait until the days of mourning for his father are over, and then will kill his brother Jacob (Gen 27:41). To “hold a grudge” means to harbor deep animosity, so deep it can lead to murder. For the brothers, that same scenario is possible. Their family tradition would suggest that the situation is really serious, even though Joseph had assured them of his love and concern when his identity was first revealed to his brothers (Gen 45:1–15).

## The scheme

The brothers devise a scheme to deceive Joseph and to protect themselves. In doing this, they are following in the footsteps of their father Jacob, a notorious trickster. In fact, his name “Jacob” means one who deceives or plays devious tricks.

The scheme involves creating a death-bed speech for Jacob—a speech which the loving son, Joseph, could be expected to honor—and having it delivered to Joseph. That speech, devised in fear and deceit, is laden with importance.

“Say to Joseph: ‘I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him (Gen 50:17).

Is this a confession of guilt? Do the brothers act out of a sense of repentance for their misdeeds? Or, is their motive still one of fear and self-preservation?

In formulating this speech, the brothers acknowledge the wrong they have done—a crime or an act of rebellion. In Hebrew this was an evil deed, a sin that caused harm.

Notice the careful wording of the final line. The brothers identify themselves as servants of the God of Jacob, Joseph’s father. The brothers are playing on Joseph’s personal and spiritual bond with his father. They are using language designed to win Joseph’s favor.

What do these tears mean? Are the tears of Joseph a prelude to rage? A man distraught by what his brothers have done? Does Joseph see through the scheming of his brothers? Is there any hint that the brothers are finally sorry for their sins? Or, are they only trying to “save their skins”?

## The tears

Joseph responds, once again, by bursting into tears. The painful weeping that occurred when the father died is repeated. Joseph is distraught. In response the brothers also burst into tears and reply, “We are here as your servants.” They “fall down” before Joseph as they did in the very dream that once provoked their anger against Joseph (Gen 37:9–11).

This is the moment where we might stop the story, and ask the listener to predict what would happen next. The story could take one of several directions.

## The healing word

Joseph’s reply is extraordinary. It reflects the heart of a person who heals through forgiveness. Consider the process of healing in what follows:

First, Joseph says twice, “Do not be afraid.” Joseph is no fool. He sees through their scheming and reaches back to the motive for what they have just done—out of fear! He does not publicly expose their trickery and deceit. He deals with a

deeper problem—their insecurity and fear. So the first phase of his healing word is assurance, dealing with their inner fears.

Second, Joseph asks the rhetorical question, “Am I in the place of God?” Ironically, Joseph could have said, “yes.” As an Egyptian ruler he could be viewed as a ruler in the place of an Egyptian deity and could pronounce judgement on the brothers as a judgement from God. Instead, he chooses to identify himself as a human being like others. Joseph is a man and leaves judgement to God. Another phase of healing is identifying with those in need, being human and not playing God.

Third, Joseph reads the history of their relationships from a gospel perspective. He refuses to allow their wrongs to be determinative. Joseph does not retaliate, answering one wrong with another. Joseph does not see justice as retribution or punishment. Instead, he discerns that behind their limited human ways, God is at work. What they planned for evil God turned into good: the preservation of a people. The goodness and love of God works in our lives even when they are broken and destructive. A third facet of healing is to discern the hand of God in our lives “working together for good.”

Fourth, Joseph demonstrates his forgiveness in more than words. He again assures his brothers that they and their families will have all the provisions they need to live in Egypt. Here there is no animosity, only reassurance. By these actions Joseph’s forgiveness also involves practical politics, giving security to this family of aliens in Egypt.

Fifth, the comment of the storyteller summarizes the force of Joseph’s forgiveness. Literally the text reads, “he [Joseph] has compassion (*nacham*) on them and speaks to their heart.” “So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen 50:21). In this way, he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

*Nacham*: In one form this verb describes someone who is “sorry” for his/her deeds and “grieves” over what has happened. In another form, it indicates compassion or empathy when another person is in pain. In this story, we might expect the brothers to grieve for their sins. Instead, it is Joseph who grieves. Joseph has empathy—a grieving compassion—even if his brothers seem to remain fearful. In the end, Joseph speaks “to their heart.” Joseph’s forgiveness is total. He reaches out with compassion to bring healing to the family.

## For further discussion

It is generally assumed that forgiveness is to be preceded by repentance. We pronounce forgiveness of sins in church after confession. In real life, however, forgiveness may not necessarily precede grief and sorrow over sin. Sometimes forgiveness on the part of the injured party evokes repentance. Sometimes it is the word of love, or “speaking to the heart,” rather than the threat of the law that evokes repentance and leads to healing.

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Describe situations or events in your life where the word of forgiveness had the power to heal and restore relations even when the guilty party did not admit to being wrong. Recount other episodes where the power of forgiveness was part of the process of healing. How does this differ from the common Lutheran understanding that the law convicts us of our sin and the gospel extends the word of forgiveness from Christ? Is there a sense that God has offered forgiveness before we repent?

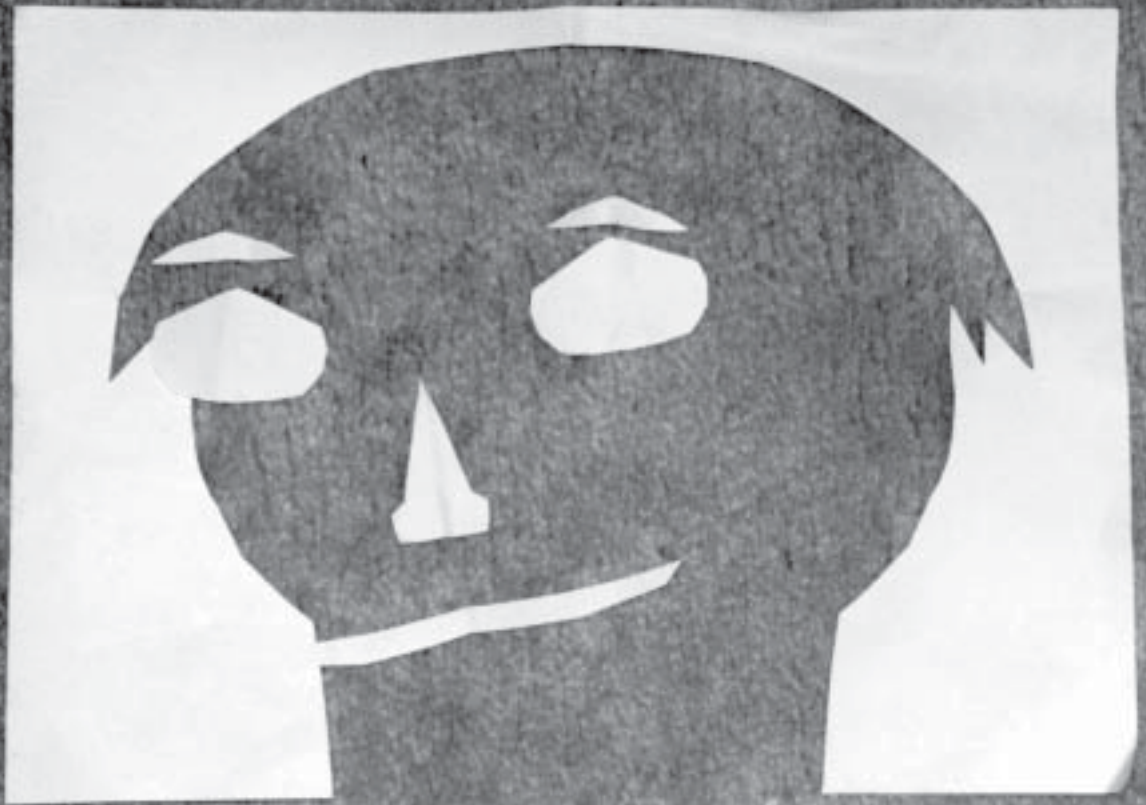
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## Luke 7:36–50

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<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup> She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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## Forgiveness that heals

A woman is crashing a stylish party. She is not just any woman but is seen as “a sinner.” It is likely that she was a prostitute, a well-known local whore. Jesus is at the party, being entertained by a Pharisee. Pharisees were concerned about proper conduct at meals, and the woman is spoiling the banquet! She is making a public spectacle of herself and also putting Jesus to a test.

According to standards of propriety, Jesus had no choice but to reject the woman, or at least, protect himself from being touched by her. After all, couldn't he perceive what kind of woman she was? But Jesus submits to her touch, while he suggests to his host that he reads his thoughts. Indirectly this also means that Jesus is well aware of the kind of woman this is. But instead of keeping her at a decent distance, he distances himself from the Pharisee at whose table he reclines.

The narrative makes a sharp contrast between the sinful woman who appears as an uninvited and unwanted guest, and the host of the banquet who is a respected man in society. The host has invited Jesus to such a grand meal that they actually lie at the table. Neither of the two is initially named. The point is this huge discrepancy in status, made clear from the beginning.

A similar story is told in the other Gospels. There Jesus is anointed by a woman at the beginning of the Passion narrative, and according to Mark and Matthew, she is commended by Jesus who declares, “what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mt 26:13). In the Gospel of John she is said to be Mary of Bethany. In later tradition these stories were all merged, and the

“sinful” woman with a jar of ointment was identified as Mary of Magdalene. Luke, however, leaves her nameless.

While in the other accounts the anointing occurs in anticipation of Jesus' death, the story in Luke 7 is about Jesus who offers divine forgiveness in response to love. But isn't love an effect of forgiveness? Isn't forgiveness God's free gift, God's loving embrace of sinners, especially those who repent? Can the woman's desperate action and tears be anything but signs of repentance?

There is an embarrassing ambiguity in this story that is not easily resolved—if at all. Many interpreters have tried to come to terms with the lack of consistency by distinguishing between several layers of tradition in the present story. The different positions are assigned to different layers, the latter commenting on and correcting the earlier. That is why the parable introduced into Jesus' speech in verses 41–43 does not fit the story; in fact, it misinterprets rather than interprets it. In the end, Jesus seems to go against himself.

In verse 47, Jesus explains the woman's lavish love as a sign of forgiveness. Translations of the first part of this verse tend to seek consistency with the parable and the latter part of verse 47: “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” This supports the understanding that her love follows Jesus forgiveness, or is released by it. However, the Greek is ambiguous and may equally well mean: “Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much.” This is contrary to the parable and the last words of verse 47: “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” It indicates that Jesus' forgiveness is a response to her love. This, in fact, concurs with the flow of the narrative. Only in the end, after she prostrates herself in love, is forgiveness proclaimed.

The ambiguity is inherent in the story as we have it. A unifying perspective is the

How do you view the relationship between human love and God's forgiveness?

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power Jesus has “even to forgive sins” (verses 48–49). But are there requirements attached? Jesus’ little treatise to Simon, his Pharisee host, appears to explain this. It also shows that Jesus knows what is hidden. He demonstrates his prophetic ability, not by dismissing the woman, but by letting his Pharisee host understand that he can read his thoughts. Jesus tells him a parable. It is simple and reflects the cruel realities of life where people were easily trapped into increasing cycles of debt. The twist of the parable is the unthinkable cancellation of debts of those unable to pay. However, the point of comparison is not the cancellation, but what follows. Forgiveness is a healing force; it generates love. The more that is forgiven the greater the love.

The application ought to be clear: since the woman is a sinner, she has been forgiven more and loves Jesus more than those, including the Pharisee, whose lives seem to be proper and blameless. Their need for forgiveness is less, and accordingly they love less. So far, so good. However, the logic also requires that the woman was forgiven before she appears with her excessive gifts and act of love. This has led many interpreters to assume a previous encounter between Jesus and the woman where her many sins were forgiven, her great debt cancelled. In other words, the story is completely turned round. The concluding words do not come at the end, but were said before in a story not told. But there is nothing in the larger narrative to suggest they had met before. So what is wrong with the logic Jesus commends? What makes it sound as if Simon in judging correctly is actually condemning himself? The parable ought to have cleared him.

Jesus continues by contrasting the behavior of the sinful woman and the Pharisee. The balance is very much in her favor. Her dramatic and costly action is interpreted as an expression of love.

Her weeping could be a sign of repentance, of joy, or of devotion. If we assume that we know which it is, we violate the silence of the story itself. Her actions are not to satisfy a basic need for sustenance. Both in terms of her means and ways, her service is excessive; it has a character of surplus.

Whereas in the other accounts it is Jesus’ disciples who complain about the waste involved, there is no trace of such a reaction in Luke. The woman outdoes the Pharisee’s party, and Jesus turns her action into a criticism of the Pharisee host. It is irrelevant to ask whether Jesus’ complaints concern expectable acts of hospitality. The point is that this prostitute and party-crasher acts in such a way that the Pharisee is put to shame on his own premises. His lack of love has been exposed through her shower of great love.

Discuss examples from your setting of encounters similar to that of the woman and the Pharisee. How is Jesus active in the midst of them?

Jesus’ concluding words of forgiveness are spoken to the woman directly. For the first time she is not just the cause or topic of the men’s conversation. She herself speaks only through her deeds. Jesus’ final words resonate with the healing stories. In these stories women neither lay claims, nor do they fight their way through. They seem to respect the rules of propriety, and are helped because Jesus himself takes the initiative.

This “sinful” woman, who anoints Jesus in sovereign disdain of all norms for respectable conduct, is a remarkable exception. She may not utter a word throughout the story, yet she is the one who initiates whatever follows among the men and between her and Jesus. In all her humbleness, she makes a point of herself. That is why this story may be

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included among what we could call “the wrestling stories” in the Bible. They tell us that sometimes people fight and argue with God, and God gives in, even seems to be overcome by them. The famous example is Jacob who wrestles with God through the night and does not let go until he is blessed. In the Gospel of Mark the Syrophenician woman wins an argument with Jesus, and her daughter is healed. Finally, there is this sinful woman who by her lavish act of

love puts the Pharisee to shame and is forgiven.

**“Do you see this woman?”**

To her Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.” Her love is interpreted as an expression of faith, of the conviction that Jesus may heal, and that in his forgiveness there is salvation.

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