

Subject: Freedom from the Prison of the Past

From: slavetoruler@bible.net
Genesis 50:15-21 (Pentecost 17)

Dear Christian,

If anyone understands what it's like to be locked away in a prison, it would be me. Usually if you're locked in a prison it's because of something you have done. In my case it was somehow related to what my brothers did to me. My name is Joseph. I was one of twelve sons of my father, Jacob. He tended to favor me a little too much and he showed it by giving me that coat of many colors, an expensive gift in my time. This made my brothers extremely jealous although I probably didn't help the situation too much by how I acted. Their jealousy grew into hatred after I had dreams which said they would eventually bow down to me. One day when our father sent me to check on my brothers out with the flocks, they threw me in a pit, sold me into slavery, and then told my father a wild animal had killed me.

My brothers may have abandoned me, but God hadn't. While in slavery in Egypt, God blessed everything I did in my master's house. You would think that they couldn't get much worse, but they did. My master's wife tried to get me to do the unthinkable - to sleep with her. After I refused, she accused me of essentially trying to rape her. As a result I was thrown into prison. For two years I was locked away in prison until finally Pharaoh released me. He was impressed by my plan to save Egypt from seven years of famine that followed seven years of plenty. Pharaoh made me a ruler in the kingdom second only to him so that I could carry out this plan to save lives.

I was released from that prison and now had a position of power in the kingdom, but I had been in that situation all because of my brothers. When people sin against you, that hurt can run deep into our hearts. How easy it could have been for my heart to remain locked away in a different prison of the past - the prison of hurt, anger, and hatred towards my brothers who had done such a horrible thing to me. When you're locked away in that kind of prison, the only solution the sinful heart sees is to hold on to that hurt, cling to that hatred, embrace the grudge, and seek vengeance, payback. Our sinful nature does not want to forgive those who sin against us. What we often don't understand is that by holding on to that hurt it really locks you away in the prison of the past unwilling to be released. Yet there is freedom from the prison of the past whether it's sinful actions done by you or by someone else to you. That freedom centers around God's grace.

Years had passed. Things had changed. I had brought my father, my brothers, and the whole family down to Egypt. They were given some of the best land to live. I had taken care of them, but now my father had died. Now with his death came the realization on my brothers' part of what that might now mean for them. Their past sins weighed very much on their minds. Their unbrotherly action towards me, selling me into slavery and how they had embittered our father's life with a great lie, all of that weigh heavy on their conscience. Their past sins could present consequences that terrified them.

They knew how deeply they hurt me. They had beat themselves up many times over the years. Their own hearts were locked away in the prison of past guilt as they now thought the time was coming when I would finally get back at them for what they had done. I was not the powerless slave they had once sold. I had the power and influence to impose upon them any retaliation I wanted.

I had seen them through the famine. I provided for their every need. I arranged for them to settle in one of the most fertile areas of Egypt. I had shown them only kindness and love. Yet now they feared my true feelings toward them which might have been suppressed out of respect and love for our father, would finally come out essentially demanding payback. Vengeance is what they expected and they pleaded for forgiveness.

Confessing their sins through the message of my father before he died, it was clear that God's law had convicted them of their sins against me. They had received forgiveness from God himself, but their guilt and fear were still weighing heavily on their hearts. Their hearts were still trapped in the prison of their past actions as they pleaded for my forgiveness too. I really had two choices - forgive or not forgive.

For people who struggle with guilt over their past sins, their hearts are trapped in that same prison. When people sin against you and plead for forgiveness, like me, you only have two choices. Choice one. You could hang on to the hurt in your heart and hold that sin against them. You could do absolutely nothing letting them rot in the prison of their past pressing the guilt against them even harder. You could seek vengeance to get back at them, but what good does any of that do? It keeps consciences locked away in the prison of the past. It makes you a prisoner of hatred.

Choice two is to release them from that prison declaring a forgiveness that has let go of the hurt in your heart, forgiveness that no longer holds that sin against, forgiveness that does not seek payback of any kind. So why would you choose choice number two? It's because you treasure God's grace in your life.

I recognized God's grace in my own life. It wasn't hard to see. Yes he had taken care of me all those years from slavery to prison to being a ruler over all of Egypt with a grand saving plan in mind. Yet God in his grace had released me from an even greater prison of my past, the prison of my own sins. God had forgiven me of my sins. I trusted that God would keep his promise to send a Savior who would pay the debt of my sin. My debt before God was paid. I was free from the prison of my own guilt with no strings attached, no remaining debt I had to pay.

So at their message, my tears revealed my heart's intent. Embracing God's grace and treasuring the release of forgiveness I had before God, I had already forgiven them years before as God forgave me. Now I wanted to free them from the prison of their own past. I wanted to release them of any remaining guilt that was keeping their hearts locked away and fearful of payback. When they came falling down at my feet seeking to make restitution by offering themselves into servitude, my words and actions set their hearts and released their burdened consciences.

"Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God," I said. They had no reason to be afraid of what I might do. God had already forgiven their sins just as my sins are forgiven. To now seek vengeance would have been to put myself in God's place. Who was I to hold that sin against them and keep them locked away in their prison of past guilt when God wasn't holding them there? After giving them assurance of my forgiveness, I was going to continue to do just the opposite of vengeance. I was going to care for them and their families. Finally my brothers were freed from the prison of their past.

My friends, you know the grace of God that has forgiven your sins. They are debts you could have never repaid as they locked you away in the prison of your own guilt. Yet God in his love has canceled those debts through the blood of Jesus. He was the one who was offered up as the payment for those sins. He bore the guilt of your sins in your place. Because of Jesus it's as if those sins never happened. You are free from the prison of your past. Your confession plea has been answered! "Forgive us our sins!"

Freed from the prison of your own past guilt, those forgiven and freed by God continue that prayer you know so well. "As we forgive those who sin against us." That's easy to say and not always easy to actually do. The hurt often runs deep leaving scars on your heart. Your sinful nature would rather hold on to that hurt and keep those who have sinned against you chained to their guilt, but are you in the place of God? Hasn't the same God who forgave your sins also forgiven them? Wasn't the same Savior whose blood was shed for you on the cross, shed for them too?

Dear Christian, treasure your freedom by setting them free from the prison of their past. Forgive as God forgives. It is forgiveness from the heart. It harbors absolutely no ill-will, no hurt, no anger, no plans for future vengeance. It doesn't add strings as conditions of forgiveness. It is forgiveness freely given just as it has been freely given to you. Then there is freedom from the prison of the past.

Your fellow freed sinner,

Joseph



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