

From Conflict to Community

Part 4, Genesis 45:1-18

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping.

⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay.

¹⁰ You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me--you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have.

¹¹ I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

¹² "You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. ¹³ Tell my father about all the honour accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

¹⁴ Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

¹⁶ When the news reached Pharaoh's palace that Joseph's brothers had come, Pharaoh and all his officials were pleased. ¹⁷ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Tell your brothers, 'Do this: Load your animals and return to the land of Canaan,

¹⁸ and bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land.'

This week on the channel ten program, Long Lost Family, a daughter went in search of her estranged father. For twenty years they had not seen hide nor hair of each other. Kind of tragically, the daughter described their bust up as a fight over a wedding which never happened and her father couldn't even remember what it was about. This illustrates that the real difficulty in conflict is not so much the things that happen as the emotion that surrounds the things that happen. We can do things and say things that wound, hurt and alienate one another, and as a wise counsellor once said to me, those things are like the pictures on a TV screen, but the emotions are the volume and very often they dictate how we respond. This is why it took some twenty years for a father and daughter to dial down the emotional volume so that

they could see what was on the screen of their life and decide that they wanted to be together, and then they began to move from conflict to community.

Today's final chapter of the Joseph saga illustrates perfectly how this kind of emotion is the great challenge in our journey from conflict to community.

Suddenly Joseph comes face to face with the brothers who thought of killing him but ended up selling him into slavery and in that moment, Joseph finds himself completely overwhelmed by emotion. It's not surprising, the two most emotional people in all of the Old Testament are Jacob and his son Joseph. Every other character in the Old Testament is only recorded as having at most, one teary moment, but Jacob and Joseph blubber at the drop of a hanky. Jacob cried when he saw the love of his life for the first time (Genesis 29:11). He cried when he was finally reunited with his brother Esau (Genesis 33:4) and he cried when he heard that his son Joseph had been killed (Genesis 37:35). Joseph is portrayed as being even more emotional than his father and it will take four very chunky chapters, for Joseph to work through all that emotion.

In Chapter 42, during a terrible famine, Joseph's brother's head down to Egypt to buy food, all except the youngest son Benjamin, who Jacob won't let out of his sight because of what happened to Joseph. When the brothers arrive in Egypt and seek out the official who controls the sale and distribution of food they fail to recognise that the official is in fact their long lost brother Joseph. Joseph on the other hand immediately recognises them and white hot anger rises up in him because of what they had done to him. He angrily accuses them of being spies and locks them up in prison for three days. During that time Joseph comes up with a plan to exact some kind of revenge. He imprisons one of them and tells the other brothers that there will be no more food for them unless they bring their youngest brother Benjamin back to Egypt. However, just before the brothers leave to go back home, Joseph overhears the brothers talking, expressing responsibility and genuine regret for what they did to Joseph all those years ago. This stirs up in Joseph a whole different bunch of emotions.

²⁴ He turned away from them and began to weep, but then turned back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes. (Genesis 42:24)

Ooh, you can just feel the conflict in Joseph. In the midst of his hurt and anger he also feels longing for the family that he has lost. In the next chapter (Chapter 43), the brother's return to Egypt looking for more food. This time they bring their younger brother Benjamin and they are really puzzled why this Egyptian official wines and dines them. What they are also unaware of is the storm of emotion going in Joseph at the sight of the brother he was closest to, the brother he grew up with the brother he shared a mother with.

³⁰ Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there. (Genesis 43:30)

Sometimes we human beings become captives to a crazy emotional dance, revenge, run away, reach out, revenge, run away, reach out, and the question is how will the

dance end? In Chapter 44, we note that despite the whirl of conflicting emotions Joseph continues with his plan for revenge, which is to do maximum emotional damage to the family by threatening them where they are most vulnerable, the wellbeing of their youngest brother Benjamin. Joseph stands at a very difficult crossroad. Will he have his revenge on the ones who have harmed him? Or will he just run away from them completely? He is tempted, they don't know who he is and he has already allowed them to walk out of his life once, and he's probably tempted to do it again.

Or will Joseph follow another set of emotions that are in play, he has discovered that despite all of his anger and hurt, he still deeply cares for these people, so will he reach out to them? Well - yes:

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. (Genesis 45:1-2)

Joseph reaches out, but the key questions are how and why? The Bible says that when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers they were terrified (Genesis 45:3). They were terrified because they did not live in a forgiving world, they lived in a revenge culture, an eye for an eye culture, a culture which Mahatma Ghandi says turns the whole world blind. When we read this story we sometimes miss that something strange and wildly new is happening to these people. These are people who routinely chop each other up for kindling at every real and imagined insult so the brothers do not recognise forgiveness when it is offered to them because it is so alien. So what has happened to make Joseph act in this new and unexpected way? Well Joseph's explanation is very simple, God has done something to him.

⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Genesis 45:5-8 (NIV)

God is at the centre of this strange change in Joseph's nature and when we push deeper into the story something stranger and even more wonderful emerges. The story of Joseph is the story of a man who is betrayed by his family, he suffers and is falsely accused of a crime he did not commit. He is sentenced to the place of the dead, the prison of the King. But then miraculously, inexplicably, he emerges from the place of the dead and is given great power. He brings total forgiveness to those who have harmed him and he creates a new community of love and forgiveness. Who are we really talking about here?

You see, centuries before Jesus was born, we are hearing in this ancient story a revelation of how the loving heart of God longs to change our heart and help us to move from being a people of conflict to a people of community. Jesus spent most of

his ministry dealing with conflicts that were based in other people's emotions. A significant number of the religious leaders hated him because he challenged their beliefs and their behaviours (Mark 11:18). They also hated him, out of jealousy because the whole world was going after Jesus (John 12:19), he was a better and more popular religious leader than they were and they hated him for it. In John chapter 8, Jesus acknowledged that right at that moment there wasn't much he could do about their hate, the emotions were all too powerful, but, he said there was time coming when things would change.

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. (John 8:28)

Jesus is saying that when you have lifted me up on that cross, then a power will be released into the world that will change you, that same power that changed the heart of Joseph. A little later on in chapter 8 Jesus will describe the change in this way.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-37)

Jesus sets us free, from the emotional impulses of hate and revenge, because God's forgiveness of us, releases in us God's own Holy Spirit which is more powerful than the power of emotions. You see forgiveness is not an emotion it is a spiritual decision that arises in response to God's loving forgiveness and power. So many people waste enormous amounts of their life waiting to feel a forgiveness that will never come because forgiveness is not a feeling. Because God so loved the world he chose to release forgiveness through the cross, it is God's decision that changes everything. Paul, a man who once pursued a life of hate and revenge describes the new choices we have in Jesus:

¹³ You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." ¹⁵ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Galatians 5:13-16

The power of God's spirit can change our hearts and change our lives from conflict to community and I believe this with all my heart, but do you believe it? For many people this is really a difficult message to believe. They look around in the world and they see the savagery of men stalking their partners and violently pouring out their rage. We see whole communities seeking to exterminate other communities, out of undiluted hate. Against such things the gospel of the forgiving cross can seem like so much gibberish lost in a hurricane of human emotion. But it's not.

Al-Rashid was the commander of a fanatical Islamic group that sought to convert everyone to Islam and make all nations fall under Islamic rule. He was angered by reports of Muslims converting to Christianity and spreading the Gospel. So he

formed a special task force to track down the Christian leaders who were responsible and convert or kill them.

Rashid heard about Pastor Paul, a former Muslim who was telling other Muslims about Jesus. The terror leader developed a plan to kill Pastor Paul's family first, then capture the Christian leader, force him to convert back to Islam and use him as a propagandist against Christianity. They made many attempts. "We attacked them several times," Rashid recounted, "and miraculously they escaped." Once they initiated a plan to kill the family at night, but saw what appeared to be soldiers or gunmen stationed around their house, so they backed off.

Rashid discovered that Pastor Paul's family lacked adequate food and their children were hungry and weak. So he sent a woman to deliver poisoned fast food to them. But on the way to their house a dog bit the woman, seriously injuring her, and she never arrived. They sent a second woman with poisonous chocolate to give Pastor Paul's children. The boys ate the chocolate and survived, but the pastor's daughter got very sick.

Rashid recalls; "I was watching with two others from an ambulance near the hospital to see his daughter's death. Our plan was to kidnap the dead body along with his family in our ambulance," Then something happened that amazed Rashid. "I saw a ball of light came down from the sky and stand over the room where his daughter was lying unconscious," he says. To his utter disbelief he watched a hand come from the ball of light, touch the pastor's daughter, and she immediately regained consciousness and stood up. He was astonished to see a hole in the middle of the hand and that blood was flowing down. "I trembled with fear," Rashid says. "I felt giddy and fell down. My friends moved me from there at once."

After this unusual incident Rashid found it difficult to sleep. When he attempted to drift off, a vision of the hand entered his mind. The following night a shadow of a human face appeared with the hand and asked him why he was "nailing him." "I lost my peace," Rashid recalls. He was afraid to say anything to his friends.

Surprisingly, Rashid had a Bible in his room. "Actually I was using its verses for criticizing Christianity and justifying Islam." He opened the Bible and his eyes fell on this verse: "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not." (John 1:9-10 KJV) "I understood it was about Jesus," he says. He realized the ball of light that came from above was actually Jesus, who suffered when he was nailed to the cross.



His heart softened, Rashid went to see Pastor Paul and shared everything with him. Unsure what his reaction might be, he was surprised when Pastor Paul embraced him, with tears running down his face. "I was once an enemy of Jesus Christ, but he loved me," Pastor Paul said. "He was

crucified — gave His life for me — then He rose from the dead. Because of His love I can love you, because Christ loves you. I believe Jesus Christ Himself brought you here to share this love and to find salvation.” “Jesus is the prince of peace,” he continued. “And He will give you peace. Accept Him as your Saviour,” he exhorted. Rashid surrendered his heart to Jesus Christ. (Source – “Bibles for Mideast”)

I chose to reference this story of forgiveness because it is so impossible, but as the Bible says, nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:27). But sometimes it feels impossible, sometimes the volume of our emotions, whether they be anger, grief, fear or despair seem so loud and so powerful we believe that it is impossible for God to do anything. If that is what it's like for you then I want to challenge you that God can do the impossible, can dial down the volume of your emotions and help you become free. In the story of Joseph, God is telling us that he knows how difficult working through this stuff can become. God knows that it's complicated and he doesn't expect you or I to instantly move from hurt to reconciled, from conflict to community. He knows this is going to take some time but he also wants us to know that He can do the impossible, if only we will trust him.