

Genesis 50:15-21

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"

16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:

17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."

When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"

20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

I tried to count the stain removal products we have in our home. We have products for removing carpet stains, food stains, grease stains, even rust stains. Many of them don't work because some stains are just plain stubborn.

We learn from the lives of Joseph's brothers that guilt is the most stubborn stain of all. Nothing can remove it. Nothing, that is, except God's forgiveness. The wonderful news we will celebrate today is this:

GOD'S FORGIVENESS REMOVES THE STUBBORN STAIN OF GUILT.

I. GUILT IS THE STUBBORN STAIN NOTHING ELSE REMOVES.

II. ONLY GOD'S FORGIVENESS REMOVES THIS STAIN

I. GUILT IS THE STUBBORN STAIN NOTHING ELSE REMOVES.

Guilt is like a stain we try to hide; but it keeps reappearing. Joseph's brother continued to feel guilt over what they had done to Joseph years earlier. They had sold Joseph to slave traders to get rid of him permanently. Then they lied to their father that wild animals had gotten him. Thus they couldn't comfort their grieving father without uncovering their sin. His grief must have been a continual reminder of their guilt.

Fifteen years passed. Then Joseph reappeared in their lives like a nightmare. The famine brought them to Egypt where Joseph was ruler.

But Joseph forgave them: *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! 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. ... 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. 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. 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.'* (Genesis 46:4-11)

Even though Joseph forgave them, the reunion causes the stain to reappear, worse than ever. Now they have to face Joseph who holds power over them, and they have to tell their father the truth. They live with the fear of what Joseph will do and they dread what their father will say.

Joseph's forgiveness doesn't remove the stain, not even though many more years pass. Thirty nine years after they had sold their brother to slave traders their father Jacob dies. Now the brothers fear Joseph will get his revenge. Their guilt not only reappears like a dirty stain. In fact, it had been there all the time. That is why

they had plotted with their father while he was still alive. *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."*

Their guilt clouded their thinking. They just couldn't believe they were forgiven by Joseph. *His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.*

So Joseph reassures them again, reminding them that what happened was part of God's plan. He comforted them and spoke kindly to them to show he was not their judge or enemy: *Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.*

Joseph's brothers illustrate that a troubled conscience needs to be reassured over and over by something convincing. What is that reassures troubled consciences? What removes the stubborn stain of guilt?

Human wisdom has no stain remover that can get rid of guilt. This fact is illustrated by an article by a respected doctor of Psychology. The article titled: *5 Tips for Dealing with Guilt* was authored by John M. Grohol, PsyD. He is founder & editor-in-chief Psych Central, the Internet's largest and oldest independent mental health and psychology network. His five tips were:

- 1. Recognize the kind of guilt you have and its purpose.** He distinguishes between "healthy" or "appropriate" guilt serves a purpose of redirecting our moral or behavioral compass, and "unhealthy" or "inappropriate" guilty serves no rational purpose. (Was Joseph's brothers' guilt: "healthy and appropriate"? Was it just to serve a rational purpose and improve them as individuals? Surely it was more than that. Both God and Satan are involved. God was holding them accountable, and Satan, the accuser, never stopped prosecuting them. Much more was involved than self-improvement.)
- 2. Make amends or changes sooner rather than later.** Healthy guilt is telling us we need to do something different in order to repair relationships important to us (or our own self-esteem). (Would Joseph's brothers be comforted by hearing this? It is true that amends and changes are called for, but they had long since made amends and changes. Yet the stain of guilt was still there. Satan wouldn't let them forget it.)
- 3. Accept you did something wrong, but move on.** If you did something wrong or hurtful, you will have to accept that you cannot change the past. (Would Joseph's brothers be comforted by this? Their consciences continued to make them afraid of the consequences of their sin. They couldn't move on. They needed to be reassured over and over by something convincing.)
- 4. Learning from our behaviors.** (Joseph's brothers had learned the lesson, but the guilt still tormented them. What would remove it?)
- 5. Perfection doesn't exist in anyone.** Nobody is perfect, even our friends or family members who appear to lead perfect, guilt-free lives. Striving for perfection in any part of our lives is a recipe for failure, since it can never be attained. We all make mistakes and many of us go down a path in our lives that can make us feel guilty later on when we finally realize our mistake. The key, however, is to realize the mistake and accept that you're only human.

It is true that nobody is perfect, that we all make mistakes, but God's law doesn't say: "Nobody's perfect so just do what you can."

There is one thing that stands out in Dr. Grohol's article: humanistic psychology (psychology that doesn't factor in a forgiving God) doesn't have a stain-remover for guilt. Humanistic psychology sees everything in terms of personal empowerment. It is all about me, my self-improvement and happiness.

Joseph's brothers wouldn't be comforted by that.

Even Joseph's words did not take away the stain of what they had done. So he reassured them over and over.

What about the guilt in our lives.

Guilt is a very personal thing. Also it is something we tend to hide from others, perhaps even from ourselves. Yet it is like a stain that keeps reappearing. Who doesn't have scars from something in their family? We can't seem to forget what we have done or suffered. We may blame ourselves for something with children. We were too harsh or too lax. Or it may be something current like hurtful words to a spouse. Our flaws are probably exposed more in the family than anywhere else.

What removes the stain of guilt? What will remove it once and for all? Answer: God's forgiveness!

II. Only God's forgiveness removes the stain of sin

God doesn't deny or diminish guilt with slogans like: "Nobody's perfect." His law doesn't say it is all right if we are not perfect; it demands perfection.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers and gives the perfection God's law demands. That perfection is the perfect obedience of Jesus. He lived under the law for every person in history to provide us with a record of perfection. God credits the believer with the perfect life of Jesus. This silences the law's demand and threat.

But there is more! Christ also bore in his innocent body the consequences of all our guilt—that of Joseph's brothers and us! All the inexcusable things! The words, thoughts, deeds!

The only stain remover for guilt is the blood of Jesus Christ: *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:6-9)

There is a fountain filled with blood—Immanuel was slain—and sinners who are washed therein

Lose ev'ry guilty stain, Lose ev'ry guilty stain. (Christian Worship #112, v.1)

But it is difficult to believe that all the stain of our sin can be gone because of what Jesus did. Satan keeps saying that was not enough. The stain is still there. We are still guilty. We feel unworthy because we know we are still sinners and we cannot forget our sins.

Psychologists tell us to forgive ourselves, but it is God's forgiveness that we need. God's forgiveness is what is offered in Christ. It is forgiveness based upon the life and death of Christ. God's forgiveness erases our guilt permanently, eternally.

Furthermore, as Joseph reassured his guilty brothers, God reassures us over and over in the Gospel. In our Baptism he washes away our sins as a pure act of grace. In the word of the Gospel he reassures over and over again that we are forgiven. In the Lord's Supper he gives us to eat and drink the body and blood that purchased our forgiveness with the words of promise: "Given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins."

So believers say with confidence:

I lay my sins on Jesus, The spotless Lamb of God;

He bears them all and frees us From the accursed load,

I bring my guilt to Jesus To wash my crimson stains

White in his blood most precious Till not a spot remain. (Christian Worship #372, v. 1)