

Forgiveness Finished

Genesis 50:15–21; John 19:30

All Scripture is breathed out by God. All Scripture is useful. All Scripture is true. But all Scripture is not equal. If God's Word is indeed a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, then some of those words shine brighter than others. Some of those words provide greater clarity and comfort than others. It's hard to imagine doing without certain sections of Scripture. What would Christmas be like without angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest"? What would Easter be like without the angel declaring, "He is risen"? And what would this night be like—how would Good Friday be different—without our Lord's great summation from the cross: "It is finished"?

Heaven and hell hang in the balance, based upon that little phrase from the parched lips of our dying Lord: "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). Famous last words, they are. Without those words, we might be left to wonder, "Is our sin completely paid for? Is our salvation fully won? Or is there something more that we need to do to seal the deal?" But with those words, we know for sure. With those words, "It is finished," we have comfort and certainty of our salvation.

We have confidence before God. It is finished! All that would condemn us before our God and Father has been answered for by the bloody death of our Brother, Jesus. "With his wounds we are healed. . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:5–6).

All through the season of Lent, we embarked on a journey with Joseph, from being sold by his brothers, to his imprisonment to his achievements, his suffering, the long time it took for his days to improve. Here tonight we find ourselves with him once again, this time we see his brothers struck by their actions against their young brother Joseph. They were looking for forgiveness, but according to the Genesis reading, they don't have the assurance they have it from Joseph. There is no such clarity or comfort concerning the forgiveness of their sins. These jealous brothers had conspired to murder the brother they hated. Instead, they decided it was better to make a buck by selling Joseph into slavery, better than to shed his blood. These clever siblings had gone so far as to tell their dear old dad that his favorite son was dead—shredded and slain by a

vicious wild animal. With brothers like these, who needs enemies? As we've followed Joseph's journey during these forty days, we've heard how Joseph's life was led by the Lord. Then we heard what should have been the happy ending—how Joseph saved his entire family from famine and forgave the sins of his big brothers. That should have been the happy ending even for those sinful brothers. Forgiven.

But now today we discover that Joseph's brothers have all along been doubting that forgiveness. They assumed that Joseph's forgiveness had an expiration date. It sounded too good to be true.

So, 17 years later, right after their father died, the brothers figured all bets were off. Joseph's brothers became filled with dread. They thought that their father's death signaled their doom. Now, they figured, Joseph could dish out revenge and retribution without hurting their father in the process: "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him" (Gen 50:15). Now the way was paved for Joseph to mete out punishment for the sins of his brothers. Now they would get what they knew they deserved.

It's hard not to feel some sympathy for Joseph's brothers at this point. In fact, if we're honest, we can surely identify with them. We share their guilt. We share their shame. We share their sin. Our jealousy and hatred of others is not so different from theirs—if only perhaps more carefully concealed. We all have enemies we would gladly get rid of, especially if we could make a buck in the process. And we all know the pain of a prickly conscience—a conscience that relentlessly reminds us of our sin and makes our hearts heavy with fear and guilt and shame. Even after we've been told we're forgiven.

Joseph's troubled brothers decided to take action. They manufactured a message from beyond the grave—a dying wish from their deceased father that Joseph would forgive his brothers all their sin and evil. And for good measure, Joseph's brothers all fell down on their knees and declared, "Behold, we are your servants" (Gen 50:18). With those words, we can see that they were in anguish but they were wrong in the quest for forgiveness. They didn't believe that the forgiveness Joseph spoke to them, it was a done deal, it was finished. Instead, they wanted to do something about that.

We are your servants, they said. And with those words, the brothers were trying to bargain, hoping to cut a deal, aiming to engineer a great escape from the punishment they deserved. We do it all the time. We vow to make things right and work our way back into the good graces of those we've sinned against. We promise to do better and to pay off our debt. Like the prodigal son who, on his way home, planned to ask his father to take him back as a hired hand (Lk 15:19), so we think we can clean up our own mess and earn our forgiveness.

But Joseph would have none of it. Learn from Joseph to recognize and rejoice in the sacred source of all forgiveness, he says: "Am I in the place of God?" (Gen 50:19). It is God who is the only source of forgiveness. Joseph's full and free forgiveness of his brothers was of divine origin. If it is God's desire and delight to forgive sins, then who was Joseph to withhold forgiveness? By faith, Joseph saw what his guilty brothers could not see: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). As you see, out of the mess we make for our selves and for others, God has always a plan, a plan to makes things new, plans of life and peace. O there are consequences to be sure, and consequences of death and eternal condemnation, if we don't repent, if we don't trust that source of forgiveness. As you see, what Joseph's brothers intended for evil, God used for good—that many lives should be saved.

Can you believe this? Can you comprehend the wonder of Joseph's words? Do you dare to believe the golden good news by which Joseph absolves his brothers? Can it be that all the evil that gets thrown against us, from friend and foe alike—that God will take it up into his own hands and somehow redirect it for good? Can you see what Joseph saw—that behind the despicable sins his brothers committed against him, God himself was at work for good?

That good news was so plainly depicted and declared on this holy day we call Good Friday. On this day, the good that God intended transcended the evil of man. Look to the crucifixion cross of Jesus, and you will see it plainly. You will begin to understand and believe this glorious Good News. Men intended that cross for evil. They wanted to kill the Son of God—get rid of him for good, silence him, destroy him. They lied. They gave false testimony. They perverted justice to engineer the execution of the Son of God. It was evil compounded on evil. Evil to the ninth degree. Bloody,

blasphemous evil. And God used it for good—for your good—to save you and a world full of sinners, and to open the kingdom of heaven to you and all believers.

It is finished. Every sin ever committed against you is atoned, paid for, in the death of Jesus. Every sin you have ever committed against another person is atoned for in the death of Jesus. It is finished. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor 5:19). In Christ, God was working all things for your eternal good. Sin and evil do not get the last word where you are concerned. Jesus does. And our Lord’s last word is the best of news: It is finished.

Believe it and receive it. Don’t let a guilty conscience deceive you into doubting God’s full and free forgiveness. Who are we to deny the forgiveness our Lord won for us on the cross? Are we in the place of God? No, but God in Christ has taken our place, borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. It is finished.

In Joseph’s last interaction with his forgiven brothers, there is a moving and tender scene. Joseph, his eyes still wet with tears, gives his beloved brothers the comfort and clarity they craved: “So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen 50:21). Joseph demonstrated in both words and actions his ongoing love and affection for his family. Joseph wanted to remove all doubts his brothers may have harbored about his forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus does the same for you. Today in the Church, the Lord Jesus not only forgives our sins but also demonstrates that forgiveness with clarity and comfort, with ongoing love and affection. Jesus removes all doubt. For our Lord said, “It is finished,” and gave up his spirit. Moments later, a soldier’s spear pierced his side, and at once there came out blood and water (Jn 19:34). That blood and water are still flowing here for you—water that washes you clean in Holy Baptism and blood that passes from the chalice to your lips. In that water and blood is the forgiveness of sins.

The writer of Genesis tells us that “Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house.” There is no more bitterness or strife recorded amongst them. True forgiveness leads to peace, unity and peace among men!

And today, dear friends, here you have clarity, comfort, confidence, and peace that passes understanding. Let there be no doubt. It is finished.

Amen.