

Explore the Bible Series for May 4: Acknowledge broken relationships

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Acknowledge broken relationships

- Genesis 42:6-9, 13-24

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Anywhere two people are together, no matter what the relationship or how much they love each other, eventually there will be conflict. Disagreements will arise and each side will want to “win.” Our relationships involve our emotions, and because of that, feelings will be hurt as strain is placed on the relationship due to these conflicts.

People respond to these hurt feelings in a variety of ways. Some develop grudges which they hold on to for long periods of time. Others gloss over, ignore or bury the hurt. Still others openly break off the relationship, refusing to communicate with the other person. Each of these responses results in a broken or permanently damaged relationship.

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As we have studied the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis, we have seen a family tree full of broken relationships. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the stories of Joseph and his brothers. The rift between these siblings had led to years of slavery and imprisonment for Joseph.

Eventually, however, through the blessing of God, Joseph had risen to a position of power and influence within Egypt. This position brought Joseph back into contact with his brothers who did not recognize him after such a long time. How would Joseph handle this encounter? Would he take advantage of his position and seek revenge? Would he send them on their way without ever acknowledging the relationship?

God designed us to be in relationships and thus desires we always be seeking to reconcile when those relationships are broken. As we read about the encounter between Joseph and his brothers, we can learn how we should respond when relationships are broken.

Remember past problems (Genesis 42:6-9)

There were a number of issues in the past which had led to the division between Jacob's sons including Jacob's open favoritism of Joseph, Joseph's ill-advised actions in describing his dreams and the actions of the brothers in selling Joseph into slavery. No one in this family could solely blame anyone else for the condition of the relationship among these siblings.

After years of separation, each side likely had buried the memories,

assuming that their paths would never cross again. Then one day, his brothers came into the royal palace in Egypt seeking assistance during a severe famine.

While they did not recognize their brother, the writer twice states he recognized them. Certainly all of the memories of their treatment of him must have flooded into Joseph's mind. His first thoughts may well have been to seek revenge; justifying it as repayment for the past. But the Bible is clear that Joseph's first thoughts were related to the dreams which God had given him years before which were now coming true.

This does not mean that Joseph had forgotten all of the problems of the past—he could not forget them. Indeed, he did remember them, but no longer saw them as divisive issues, but as steps God had used to bring about God's plans.

Centuries later, Paul said God uses all things in our lives to bring about good (Romans 8:28). We never need to avoid memories of past relationship problems, but use them as the first step in reconciliation that pleases God.

Explore present possibilities (Genesis 42:13-20)

Since Joseph was the only one who recognized his brothers, he would have to make the first move in reconciling. He would have to be the one to reveal his true identity. Yet Joseph recognized he had an opportunity to test his brothers. He knew he had learned humility and dependence on God from his experiences, but he wanted to know if his brothers had learned to protect their brothers.

As the son of the favored wife Rachel, Joseph knew Benjamin would have been Jacob's favorite. So he devised a plan to see how the brothers would respond if Benjamin was endangered.

Joseph had a number of options. He could have simply sent his brothers away empty-handed or given them grain and sent them on their way without ever revealing his identity. He could have thrown them all into prison for months or years. Joseph seems to have wanted to reunite the family, but only after finding out if his brothers had changed.

Often when our feelings have been hurt, the temptation can be strong to grab the first opportunity for revenge that comes. While we might initially feel relieved or vindicated, such a reaction will typically only deepen or prolong the division. God desires we always seek to heal broken relationships, and in order to do this we must take the time to explore ways to lay aside the hurt and bridge the divide in a way that leads to the best for all concerned.

Evaluate future prospects (Genesis 42:21-24)

Joseph's plan worked. Although they still did not recognize him, they quickly revealed the regret and guilt they felt over how they had treated him. They saw their current situation as divine punishment for betraying their brother years earlier.

This revelation deeply touched Joseph who saw in it the possibility for a full reconciliation. He knew that one day he would be able to tell them who he really was. He could see a day when the entire family would be brought back together. This would only happen, however, if they followed up their words with actions, so Joseph continued to carry out his plan to test them. If he had followed any of his other options, reconciliation would have never happened, but now it was a real possibility.

While it is certainly not guaranteed, Joseph's story teaches us that if we will refuse to allow the pain of the past to prevent us from exploring other possible responses, we may find a future full of the blessings of renewed

relationships including a deeper relationship with God.

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