The Point
Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

The Bible Meets Life
The actions of others, like betrayal and bad decisions, can leave us bitter. We can let bitterness continue to eat at us or we can let it go—and forgive. Forgiveness is difficult because the memory of the hurt continues to pull us back into bitterness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can move beyond such a destructive attitude, as we see in the life of Joseph.

The Passage
Genesis 45:3-11
The famine was widespread. Joseph’s father heard Egypt had food and sent his remaining sons to purchase some. Joseph recognized his brothers when they came, though they did not recognize him. After a series of tests, Joseph eventually revealed his identity to them, stressed God had placed him there to keep them alive, and urged them to move the whole clan to Egypt so he could better provide for them during the remainder of the famine.

**Genesis 45:3-11**

3 And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

4 So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

8 And it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry.

10 You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

11 There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’
GET INTO THE STUDY

ENGAGE: Begin the session with one or more of the Engage Options on the next page. (This is optional. If you’d rather skip the Engage Options, just begin with the first discussion question.)

SAY: Bitterness is destructive. Throughout the Bible, God tells us to forgive one another. Bitterness affects not only our relationships with each other but also our relationship with God.

DISCUSS: Have students discuss the question, “How would you describe the taste of bitterness?”

GUIDE: Call attention to The Point. Explain that this is the key idea to keep in mind throughout the session.

THE POINT

Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

READ: Read and summarize The Bible Meets Life for your group.

It has been said that harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. But let’s admit it: forgiving another person can be hard. Really hard. During a routine sweep of Central Park, NYPD officer, Steven McDonald, was shot in the back of the head three times by a 15-year-old kid. Because of that one momentary act of violence, Steven has spent the last 28 years confined to a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. Since that day, he has been extremely limited in what he can do. He hasn’t held his wife in two decades. He has never held or played catch with his son, who was born just a few months after the accident. But Steven has done one thing. He forgave the young man who shot him. “I forgave Shavod because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended my injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It’s bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury … I have come to realize that anger is a wasted emotion.” In our study of the life of Joseph, we’ve seen a man who had every reason to feel hurt, angry, and bitter, but he too chose forgiveness.

PRAY: Transition into the session by praying that the Holy Spirit would convict students of any bitterness they’re carrying in their hearts.
Engage Options

► Lead with Action
Give a volunteer an empty backpack. One object at a time, fill the backpack with weights, bricks, or heavy items until it eventually keeps him or her from moving forward. As you're placing the heavy objects in the backpack, assign a possible grievance or bitter thought to the object. Show that each one that we hold on to that leads us to not forgive. Say, “When we carry bitterness around with us, our relationships cannot move forward.” Let your students try on the backpack, feeling the weight.

OPTION: If you are uncomfortable with having a student wear the backpack, have the student pack the bag while you or another adult wears it.

► Lead with Atmosphere
Put out sour candy on the small group tables. While some students will be more than happy to eat the sour candy, it’s important to note that the bitterness will eventually be too much. They will eventually grow tired of the sourness. It’s the same with our spiritual walk and forgiving others. Say, “At some point the bitterness of this candy is too much. You might even feel it hurting your mouth. Consider how bitterness affects your own life. It might feel good to be angry for a while, but bitterness will eventually cost you too much.”

OPTION: You can make the Lead with Atmosphere option a game. Challenge your students to see who can eat the most pieces of sour candy.

► Lead with Media
Search the Internet for Matthew West’s story behind the song “Forgiveness.” After the clip, say, “Look at the affect of Renee’s forgiveness. Renee’s refusal to be overcome by bitterness led to salvation and restoration.”
STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

GENESIS 45:3-4

SUMMARIZE: Summarize the story of Joseph and his brothers.

The famine God had revealed to Pharaoh affected the whole region. But because Pharaoh was willing to heed the warning of the dream, he took steps so that the country would not be totally ruined by the famine (Gen. 41:36). Egypt took seven years of abundance and earmarked some of it to get them through the seven years of famine.

Other areas of the world did not fare so well. Jacob and his family were among those who suffered, but they joined the nations coming to Egypt for grain. Genesis 42–44 tell us about the game Joseph played with his brothers, pretending to be harsh. It was only after Judah pleaded for Benjamin’s life (Gen. 44:18-34) that Joseph revealed who he was, allowing his brothers back into his world.

“I am Joseph,” may not have been the most difficult words for Joseph to speak, but what happened afterward certainly could have gone differently. He could have followed his introduction by asking, “Hey, how do you like my coat now? Ever been in a pit? Let me introduce you to one,” based on the way his brothers had treated him years earlier. However after revealing his identity, he exposed his values and longing by asking if his father was still living.

SAY: What a moment for Joseph’s brothers! In an instant, they exchanged the weight of guilt and lies for a heart-stopping realization that the next few moments might be their last. But instead, Joseph invited them to come closer.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, “How can we let go of the past without forgetting it?”
Commentary

GENESIS 45:3-4

Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers. Imagine the shock waves Joseph’s disclosure sent through his brothers: “I am Joseph!” Of all the words they might have been prepared to hear, his statement probably was the last thing they expected to hear. They had assumed Joseph was dead. Yet the person they had been dealing with all this time was their brother!

Joseph immediately raised a question for which he had to have the answer: Is my father still living? Why did he ask this question when Judah repeatedly had referred to Jacob in his plea for Benjamin’s freedom? The question came from a brother, not a seeming stranger, who wanted more details about his father’s welfare. Some commentators believe Joseph’s question was something he blurted out in the emotion of the moment and out of concern for his aging father. Perhaps he wanted to ask one more time just to be sure.

Frozen with fright, the brothers wondered what Joseph would do to them in light of their mistreatment of him. The one they had sold into slavery years earlier now stood before them as their lord and master. They probably feared for their lives and wondered what revenge Joseph might take on them. Struck by the awful reality of the situation, they found themselves unable to speak. That they were terrified in his presence indicates the emotional upheaval the brothers experienced, including feelings of guilt, shame, and terror. Perhaps several moments passed as Joseph and his brothers looked at one another. Then Joseph spoke again, seeking to reassure his brothers. In a gesture of friendship, he tenderly invited them to move closer to him, perhaps so he could speak more softly and intimately. Joseph’s actions communicated his forgiveness and love toward them.

We can imagine Joseph’s brothers still were not sure of his intentions and cautiously approached him. Again he identified himself, but this time he described himself as their brother, the one they sold into Egypt. The manner in which Joseph described himself probably did little to alleviate his brothers’ fear. Certainly it must have sent chills down their spines. Doubtless, Joseph intended to remove any doubts they had about his identity and may have been making their confession of guilt for them to get it out of the way. They likely heard the words as an accusation that condemned them.

Joseph’s story reveals three realities very clearly. First, he had obviously been treated with injustice when his brothers had sold him into slavery so many years earlier. Second, he just as obviously had not forgotten the injustice he had suffered. Third, he chose to forgive despite his memory of the injustice. If we are to overcome bitterness, we can only restore relationships and move forward when we forgive whatever offense has led to the bitterness. Forgetting might not ever occur, but forgiving must.

TIP: Evaluate yourself and your teaching often. Ask yourself: What really helped students connect with the session? How can I improve next week?

TIP: Explain to students that because bitterness is so normal in our culture, genuine forgiveness is unexpected and is an incredible example of God’s love toward us.
STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

GENESIS 45:5-8

SAY: Joseph added one more amazing statement: It was all God’s plan. Not only did Joseph’s words imply his forgiveness, but they also allowed his brothers to see that they had all been instruments in God’s plan.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read the following:

The brothers had paid a high price all their lives for the awful thing they had done to their brother. But Joseph told them not to grieve or worry over what they had done.

Joseph gave his brothers permission to stand tall. Joseph said it was God and not his brothers who had sent him there to Egypt.

God brought a caravan by at just the right time (Gen. 37:25).
God “introduced” Joseph to the baker and the cupbearer (Gen. 40:2-4).
God sent the dreams to Pharaoh and gave Joseph the ability and the opportunity to interpret his dreams and offer a plan of action (Gen. 41:25-36).

God is also at work in your life, even in difficult, trying circumstances. Consider that God may be using difficult situations—and difficult people—to bring you into a better place and a closer walk with Him. Don’t hold those circumstances against the other people involved. Allow God to work through your heartfelt, honest words—words that could speak freedom and forgiveness.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, “What makes it difficult to forgive someone?”

DO: Have students complete the Action Point, “Omission vs. Commission.”

Omission vs. Commission
When it comes to sin, there are sins we commit and then there is sin that is a result of our inaction—not doing what we should have done. Determine how the following could be sins of omission:

- Not sharing the gospel with a classmate
- Not getting a good night’s sleep before a big game, meet, or performance
- Waiting until the last minute to study for the exam
Commentary

GENESIS 45:5-8

Joseph explained to his brothers why they should not be upset with themselves: God sent me ahead of you. This concept appears in verses 5, 7, and 8 of this passage. Joseph declared that God worked through even the brothers’ hate-filled act of selling him to accomplish a good purpose. This assertion expresses the doctrine of God’s providence. Paul focused on this significant truth in Romans 8:28 when he emphasized that God is at work in all things, both good and bad, for the good of those who love Him.

God is always at work to accomplish His purpose. In this instance He sent Joseph to Egypt to preserve life. God’s purpose involved salvation or preservation. This verse reminds the reader of the need for preservation. After only two of the seven lean years had passed, the famine was severe enough to cause Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain. They could not have survived another five years without assistance. God had determined to provide life-saving grain through Joseph. God not only sent Joseph to Egypt; He also placed him in a position of leadership and power that enabled Joseph to preserve lives. For five more years no plowing or harvesting would occur.

God was at work keeping Joseph’s family alive by a great deliverance. The Hebrew word describing the deliverance often refers to a remnant who escaped disaster. Joseph also declared God would preserve a remnant within the land, surviving descendants or ones remaining. Joseph again emphasized God’s providence. The same God who sent him to Egypt also established Joseph in an important leadership position in that country so He could accomplish His saving purpose.

Three titles describe Joseph’s high position. He was a father to Pharaoh. The title here had nothing to do with family relationships; rather, it identified him as one who was chief adviser to the king, giving counsel and advice. Joseph was also lord of his entire household. Joseph was over Pharaoh’s court (Gen. 41:39-40). Finally, Joseph was ruler over all the land of Egypt. He was second in command to Pharaoh. Joseph was responsible for carrying out the wishes of the king throughout his realm.

TIP: Inviting a volunteer to read aloud gets the group involved and leads to more interaction throughout the session. But don’t hesitate to read sections of the session if no one volunteers or if students have read aloud often.
The Point: Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.

GENESIS 45:9-11

SAY: Restoration is an amazing thing. When you move into a restored home, it is like a brand-new house. Over time, you stop thinking about what it used to be like.

GUIDE: Lead students to understand the way God brings restoration through forgiveness.

A restored home is nice, but a restored relationship is really amazing. When Joseph covered the relationship with his brothers in forgiveness, all of their lives had taken on a new color and a new texture. The doorway of resentment and hurt was pulled down and replaced with an entrance into love and concern. They started walking on a new foundation in their relationship that no longer was cracked, broken, or worn out from betrayal and lies; they walked on hope instead.

Joseph knew one man still was filled with mourning and sorrow: his father Jacob. Joseph directed his brothers to leave immediately and to tell their father the news. They were to tell the truth this time. Jacob’s 13 years of grief would finally turn to joy; he surely would remember the dreams Joseph had as a teenager and realize they had come to pass.

The separation between Joseph and his family had been more than the distance between them. Their relationships had been broken. But Joseph wished for intimacy again. And just like in verse 4 when he asked his brothers to come closer, in verse 10 he emphasized his desire for family closeness again.

DISCUSS: Ask students to answer the questions, “How did Joseph’s actions in this story mirror God’s actions toward us? What actions on our part begin and maintain the process of reconciliation?”
Joseph anticipated his reunion with his father. So, even before he exchanged customary greetings with them, Joseph commanded his brothers to quickly return to his father. Joseph’s words had a tone of urgency. He knew that the sooner they returned to Canaan and shared the news with Jacob, the sooner his father would come to Egypt. Joseph wanted no delay in that process. Joseph’s reference to Jacob as *my father* instead of the expected “our father” does not indicate a claim to a special relationship with Jacob. We probably should understand Joseph’s words as emphasizing his excitement about renewing the relationship with his father.

Joseph acted with authority and confidence as he commanded his brothers to tell Jacob to come to Egypt without delay. Joseph was not showing disrespect in giving this command to his father. Rather, Joseph not only was anxious to see his father, he also knew that the conditions of the famine would only become worse. Joseph also made certain promises to Jacob and the family if they would come to Egypt. He promised to settle them in the land of Goshen. Most likely Goshen is a Semitic place name rather than an Egyptian designation. The land of Goshen usually is believed to be located in the eastern delta region of the Nile River. The area was favorable for herdsmen. Joseph wanted to settle his family in this region so they would be near him.

Besides stating Joseph’s offer to provide for his family, this verse reminds Jacob’s family of the situation they would face if they remained in Canaan. Five of the seven years of famine were yet in the future. Joseph concluded that if his family remained in Canaan, they would become destitute. Joseph had the financial means and the political power to make the commitments to his family recorded in verses 10-11. He promised to provide everything needed for his extended family’s resettlement in Egypt. In his gracious and generous offer, we see another aspect of forgiveness—we seek good for the one forgiven. Joseph could have extended his invitation solely to his father, or to his father and those brothers who had not played a role in his being sold into slavery. But Joseph had overcome any bitterness he might have been tempted to cultivate, had forgiven the brothers who had wronged him, then went out of his way to see to their survival—even to their prosperity!
**APPLY IT**

**SAY:** Where do you need to deal with the issue of forgiveness?

**READ:** Ask for a volunteer to read aloud a few ways students can take what they have learned and **Apply It**.

- **Identify your hurts.** Think through the pain points in your life where you have harbored unforgiveness. Ask God to give you understanding of your hurts from that situation, and ask Him to help you forgive even as He has forgiven you.

- **Seek forgiveness.** If others may be harboring unforgiveness toward you, seek them out and ask for forgiveness. Ask God for strength, graciousness, and love as you talk to them.

- **Encourage others.** If you know of people who have broken relationships, prayerfully go to them and encourage them to pursue forgiveness. Let them know you will walk with them through the process if they need a friend.

**GUIDE:** Lead students to consider which of the three suggested responses to the Bible study most closely applies to them and their current circumstances.

**ASK:** Which of these responses do you personally need to focus on most as you live this session out? Allow time for responses.

**WRAP UP**

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking God to help students understand that God desires restoration and forgiveness in their relationships.

**ASK:** Ask students about last week’s **Live It Out** options. Discuss any responses and encourage students as they choose to apply the Bible to their lives.

**GUIDE:** Encourage students to complete one or both of the **Live It Out** activities for the week. Let them know you will discuss them next time you meet.

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MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife
The BIBLE MEETS LIFE: The actions of others, like betrayal and bad decisions, can leave us bitter. We can let bitterness continue to eat at us or we can let it go—and forgive. Forgiveness is difficult because the memory of the hurt continues to pull us back into bitterness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can move beyond such a destructive attitude, as we see in the life of Joseph.

THE POINT: Relationships can only move forward with forgiveness.
- Do have someone you need to forgive?
- Discuss with your student how the Lord calls us to forgive each other.

Have a conversation around this quote: “Bitterness is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”
—John Ortberg Jr.


LIVE IT OUT: Your student has been encouraged to do one or both Live It Out activities in the Personal Study Guide. Here are some suggested ways to help your student:

If your student chooses to do Seek Forgiveness:
- Encourage your student to seek forgiveness with the appropriate attitude.
- Pray for your student’s relationships, asking the Lord to heal them.

If your student chooses to do Forgiven:
- Talk with your student about what forgiveness from Christ really means. Allow him or her to guide the conversation.
- Discuss with your student opportunities to extend forgiveness in your own life.