

Healing Power of Forgiveness in Family Relationships

Joy Philip Kakkanattu

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru

Abstract

The Bible provides invaluable lessons for steering family conflicts towards favorable resolutions. The article reflects on the brokenness of Joseph's family as his brother betrayed him and God's plan and action of taking simple and ordinary people to show His bigger plan. From disarray, Joseph was slowly brought up in power and position to finally a time when he could enact forgiveness, reconciliation, and reunion with his family. He took steps that can be seen as viable steps that family relationships can use to heal their brokenness. The article also reflects on various ways to pursue reconciliation from Prophet Hosea.

Keywords: Joseph, Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Prophet Hosea

Introduction

The family plays a vital role in the Bible. The Bible begins with a focus on the bond established between God and humankind and between man and woman. The latter is the foundation stone of a family. The unique relationship between man and woman is expressed in the affirmation that woman is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (Gen 2:23). This phrase indicates kinship. The establishment of the institution of family is implied in the sentence, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). As Dearman (1998) notes, all these expressions show that "the creation points to the institution as the foundation of human community." He

further elucidates, “Rather than beginning with the possibilities of individuality and autonomy... the family etiology of Genesis begins with the human community as a fleshy union, the first human institution formed at the dawn of creation.”

As the Catholic Church celebrates the year of the family based on *Amoris Laetitia*, it is opportune to consider the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in fostering the family, based on some Biblical accounts, because Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia*,

The truth is that “family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. No family does not know how selfishness, discord, tension, and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life... (AL 106).

The Bible deals with many families and stories, but it seldom narrates an ideal family. God is presented as working and revealing himself through the highs and lows of family ties. Since the Bible delves much on family relationships and values, it provides invaluable lessons for steering family conflicts towards favorable resolutions. In this article, I analyze two such family narratives to find the therapeutic strategies. The first I consider is the Joseph story in Gen 37-50; the second is the family metaphor used in prophet Hosea to restore the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

The Joseph Story (Gen 37-50)

The Joseph Story narrates how the preferential love of Jacob, the father, caused his brothers to hate him due to jealousy. In the story, Joseph becomes the reason for the disruptions of the familial bond and its restoration. From the perspective of family relationships, we can identify two phases in this story: Joseph among his brothers in the household (beth ab) (chapter 37); the brothers with Joseph in Egypt (chapters 42-50). The first phase is about the brokenness in family ties due to various factors, and the second phase is about the restoration of the lost bond through multiple initiatives. Two attitudes of Joseph are given as the reason for kindling envy and animosity in the brothers towards him: 1) the attitude of superiority Joseph showed over the brothers in the interpretation of a dream (Gen 37:5-9). As Boadt (1997) notes, “From a psychological viewpoint, such brash dreams of power

over one's older siblings are more than sufficient grounds for a deep resentment and even hatred to develop." The abuse of the favored position he enjoyed with his father by carrying tales to him about the brothers. From the father's special attention and love towards him, Joseph has learned to feel a sense of superiority over his brothers as being the greatly favored one. The beautiful coat Jacob gives Joseph is a visible sign that the father was partial towards this son. "So bitterness begins to set in between Joseph and his brothers, bitterness as a hardened and rehearsed attitude rather than just a passing moment of anger." As a result, the text says, the brothers hated him, were jealous of him, and conspired to kill him. Though they abandoned the plan of killing him, they did separate him from his father and their homeland by selling him to foreigners. The estrangement caused by a claim of superiority on the part of Joseph and envy and hatred towards him from brothers is wide enough to eliminate him from the family network. They harbored such jealousy towards Joseph that the moment they could have Joseph alone with them, they spilt their hatred towards him: "They tore his clothes off and threw him in a pit to die." The news of Joseph's death's forged, and the deceptive story moved Jacob to inconsolable grief, thus widening the estrangement. The text communicates it vividly: "All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father bewailed him" (Gen 37: 35).

As is evident, the family ties are in disarray. In the language of psychology, relationality and well-being in the family are disrupted because of a lack of temperance in restraining emotional excess, especially the negative ones. The peace of the family is broken.

From this impasse of a broken family situation, how can restoration be possible? As Joseph's story further elucidates, restoration became a possibility. Joseph learned the art of temperance in expressing his emotions with self-control in the crucible of suffering and the arduous life experiences during his early years in Egypt. Suffering can temper one's management of emotions, it is said. From the innocent lad, brazenly guileless in describing his dreams and stranded in search of his brothers in Gen 37, Joseph grew to become a matured, self-composed, emotionally intelligent, and God-fearing adult in chapters 39-50. In chapter 39, we see a dutiful Joseph at the house of the Egyptian Potiphar. He resisted the enticements of Potiphar's wife controlled himself to maintain his decency and loyalty towards his master and

God, despite all the hardships that would accompany him, including imprisonment. Through Joseph's various experiences in Egypt, God made him prosper. Westermann's (1986) observation is apt:

This is a narrative of God's action and the comportment of a person before God taking place in simple, ordinary circumstances as daily work prospers and the friendly disposition of the authorities progresses. The prosperity is answered by competence, reliability, and unbending loyalty. These simple circumstances prepare to heal the shattered peace and save many from famine. Only one passage gives a hint at what is behind it all. Joseph must experience that God's presence does not smooth the road before him; a serious fall follows the first step upwards. The refrain "God was with Joseph" is expanded, "and God showed steadfastness to him," thus allowing us to anticipate what hardship Joseph must endure until he can say with the psalmist, "... he inclined to me and heard my cry (Ps. 40: 2[1]).

From Disarray to Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Reunion

Joseph slowly ascended to an essential and responsible role in Egypt by being blessed by God. When he is in this position of advantage, his brothers come before him, imploring his mercy to provide food for them and their father. He is now in a position to execute whatever he desires. Joseph recognizes his brothers, while his brothers do not. Joseph's attitude to them would determine the future of the fate of his brothers as they stand vulnerable before him. He can either be retaliatory like Cain to Abel or reconciliatory like Esau to Jacob. He opted for the latter response. Only an emotionally balanced person could keep Joseph's composure to his brothers as they stood before him. He could interact with them unfazed as if dealing with strangers, despite not having forgotten anything that he had experienced at the hands of these brothers. Keeping emotions and memory in control is significant in relationships. Joseph had good reasons to repudiate his brothers, to hate them, to drive them from his house and memory; for him, they represented a source of grief and evil. As Wiesel (1985) observes, the first response would be vengeance going along with that impulse. Wiesel (1985) writes:

Yet this was only a first impulse; he quickly pulled himself together: he would not be an avenger. There is a rare virtue in forgoing justified reprisals, overcoming well-founded bitterness. It is not easy to resist dealing out deserved punishment.

Instead, he begins a process that would demand painful decisions and sacrifices from the brothers before the truth is divulged, leading to forgiveness, reconciliation, and a happy reunion.

Here again, we need to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is something an offended person can offer the offender. Reconciliation becomes a reality when the proffered forgiveness is accepted by the other positively, who then responds dialogically, accepting and repenting their offense. Joseph did grant forgiveness to the brothers. Joseph forgave, without forgetting anything. He went to the extent of clarifying with his brothers that, though he could remember everything they did to him, still he harbored no hatred towards them. Instead, he took the initiative to talk to his panic-stricken brothers in a convincing manner to alleviate their fears of retaliation. For effecting a reconciliation, more had to be done.

Lessons in Conflict Resolutions

Joseph's steps to make reconciliation with his brothers a possibility provides a good learning curve for settling disputes, feuds, and animosity in family circles, thus restoring peace and harmony.

When the brothers approached Joseph with a request for food, he remained aloof from them as if he was a stranger, though he had recognized them immediately (Gen 42). Why he adopted such a strategy is unclear. It may be that the sudden appearance of his brothers had reopened all the questions in his life that he thought were resolved. Maybe he wanted to buy time to find an adequate way to deal with the unexpected encounter. So we can presume that the seemingly harsh words and the brief period of locking them up were a ploy to take some time to plan a strategy to send them back to bring Benjamin and their father also to Egypt. As we know, it is always better to find a proper method to deal with a delicate and challenging situation, especially in family issues. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, any emotionally charged response, like blatantly accusing them or revealing his identity, could upset the brothers and destroy any plans to restore the ruptured family ties. It could lead to unexpected emotional exchanges and trauma. Joseph's strategy slowly started to evoke an awareness of remorse in the brothers for what they had done to their younger brother. Seeing their remorse for their past despicable deeds, Joseph became more emotional in his responses. Joseph decided to reveal his identity to his brothers once convinced that they were sincere in keeping their

word to their father and would not repeat the same insensitive behavior they had shown earlier in reporting deceptively about Joseph to the father. It had caused him unimaginable sorrow. The change in the brothers became clear when Joseph pretended to retain Benjamin in Egypt. The brother wanted to spare their father from feeling bereaved once again with the loss of Benjamin. They were now willing to offer themselves instead so that Benjamin would be allowed to return to their father. What a change!! Those who sold one brother out of envy and hatred and narrated a concocted story to the father, insensitively and apathetically, had now become concerned and caring for the father and their youngest brother (Gen 42-43). Brodie (2001) gives a good appraisal of Joseph's strategy of conflict resolution:

Joseph's way of dealing with his brothers may at first appear harsh or manipulative. But if he had revealed himself immediately and offered forgiveness, they would probably never again have been at ease either with themselves or with him. They would have died wondering how accurate was the forgiveness or carrying a sense of moral inferiority. Instead, through a form of "tough love," he gave them a unique opportunity: to return, in slow motion, to the situation of their crime, a chance to do things differently, and to prove to themselves and him that they had another side. As a result, when Joseph's self-revelation finally came, the way was open to complete and peaceful reconciliation.

Speaking to the Heart with Openness: Final Act of Reconciliation

Joseph teaches us how to break the chain of selfishness, discord, tension, and conflict that violently attack and, at times, mortally wound its communion. His decision to forgive his brothers, in a way, breaks the natural logic of Newton's third law of action: Every action has an equal opposite reaction. Joseph's intelligent control over his emotions originated from his decision to forgive, neutralizing the principle of equal and opposite reaction of violence. This is also the power of the fear of God, as Joseph himself acknowledges.

The will to forgive leading to reconciliation reached its full realization when Joseph alleviated his brothers' fear of retaliation after the death of their father. They thought that Joseph's love and respect for the father worked as a deterrent for him to avenge their cruelties towards him. Joseph did this through genuine open dialogue with his brothers, telling them the truth he kept in his heart. He spoke with utmost clarity

and sincerity. He talked to them convincingly and sincerely. The text reads:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge and wants to repay us in full for all the harm we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave these instructions before he died: 'Tell Joseph this: Please forgive the sin of your brothers and the wrong they did when they treated you so badly.' Now please forgive the sin of the servants of the God of your father." When this message was reported to him, Joseph wept. Then his brothers also came and threw themselves down before him; they said, "Here we are; we are your slaves." But Joseph answered them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose, so he could preserve the lives of many people, as you can see this day. So have no fear; I, myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen 50: 15-21).

As we study Joseph's family, the stages of the restoration of ruptured relationships are worth considering and emulating in increasingly strained contemporary family relationships due to factors like envy, hatred, selfishness, power, money, reluctance to forgive forget. As Gregory Brown delineates, "We learn a great deal from Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers after twenty-two years of being estranged."

To Pursue Reconciliation:

1. We Must Pursue Change in Ourselves and Others.
2. We Must Focus on God's Sovereignty instead of the failure of Others.
3. We Must Overcome Evil with Good
4. We Must Forgive Failures and Not Continually Bring Them Up."

A final takeaway from Joseph's family reconciliation and reunion strategy is based on the question, "Who should take the initiative in this reconciliation process?" We can infer from Joseph's approach that only the one who is in an advantageous position to offer forgiveness to the offended ones can open the road towards a reunion. Of course, the success depends on the nature of the response given by the offenders. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph's strategy worked well

towards the desired outcome. The brothers accepted the forgiveness offered, and they acknowledged their evildoing. Joseph graciously reached out to them, reinterpreting the negativity of the past in terms of positive divine intent for the future and thus preparing the ambiance for a new beginning.

Lessons for Family Reconciliation from Prophet Hosea

Prophet Hosea is unique in the Bible for his use of a family metaphor to explain the reestablishment of the ruptured covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. He uses two critical relationships in a family: husband-wife and parent-child.

Reconciliation through Proper Communication

Hosea 2:1-14, using the metaphor of the husband-wife relationship, narrates the dynamics of the divine initiatives to bring back estranged Israel. Here, we shall consider only the relational aspects for our study and not the religious aspects. The metaphor deals with the possibilities of redeeming the family relationship jeopardized by marital infidelity. Here, failing to understand the love of her husband, the wife sought it elsewhere. The husband (referent Yahweh) initially adopted many negative interruptive tactics like blocking the way, withdrawing gifts given, even the violence of stripping her naked to check the wife's movements (referent Israel).

Nonetheless, none of them produced the expected positive impact of reminding her of the good times of their married relationship. On the contrary, they elicited the opposite result; instead of remembering, she forgot her husband. As we all know, it is very seldom that negative tactics produce the expected positive outcome. The husband intended to get the estranged wife back to him through aggressive measures without taking his wife into confidence. As a last resort, he decided to make a positive effort: "I will persuade her to the desert and speak to her tenderly" (Hos 2:14).

Persuading the estranged wife to the desert and dialoguing with her in a reconciliatory manner is an allusion to a physical distancing from the present context of distraction through other enticing attractions to regain their lost marital relationship. It would mean recontextualizing the "golden time of relationship" (Jer 2:2) through speaking to the heart of the other (Hos 2:15-23) and taking a pro-active approach. The translation "speak to her tenderly" does not fully convey the intended meaning. It is not the romantic talk of lovers. Still, a convincing dialogue

with the partner with tenderness would lead to the reestablishment of the original relationship based on the marital commitment they had undertaken. The scholarly opinion of Wolff (1974) is correct: “This expression belongs to the language of love, but does not mean fine words without an aim. It is an appeal, an attempt at a change of will. It is an invitation to a decision.” However, it does carry the nuance of love, affection, and tenderness. As Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia*, “Against this backdrop of love so central to the Christian experience of marriage and the family, another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relationships. It is tenderness” (AL 28). A quality much needed, especially in strained relationships.

As is evident from Hos 2:1-13, any non-communicative strategy of repairing the damaged relationship will further widen the gap of forgetting and distancing. Any intervening measures without involving the other will lead to further estrangement, while a resolution concerning the disgruntled other will lead to restoration. Problem-solving is a two-way process. One has to convince the other of the sincerity of your intentions. As *Amoris Laetitia* states, “To be open to a genuine encounter with others, ‘a kind look’ is essential. This is incompatible with a negative attitude that readily points out other people’s shortcomings while overlooking one’s own. A kind look helps us to see beyond our limitations, to be patient and to cooperate with others, despite our differences” (AL 100).

The power of creative mediation is described in Hos 2:14-23. In Hos 2:14, we see the changed positive strategy of seeking together a remedy for the impasse in the relationship by speaking to the heart of the estranged partner. It led to the restoration of the ruptured relationship. A new possibility is open in the form of a renewed commitment to abandon waywardness and recommit to the family bond.

Suffering of a Parent in Saving a Rebellious Child

Parents are complaining more and more about dealing with children showing rebellious and dissident behavior. The influence of online mass media, peer influence, and other enticements take children away from parental care and control much too soon. Many parents struggle to cope with this problem, and at times, they stand helpless. Hos Chapter 11 depicts such a scenario. This chapter delineates the love and concern with which God, the parent, nurtures baby Israel through

various developmental stages and the somewhat negative responses of the child. The profundity of parental tenderness is well-scripted in the prophetic words: “When Israel was a child, I loved him... I took them up in my arms... I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos 11:1, 3-4). But as the child grew up, it developed a vicious habit of turning away from the parent (Hos 11:7). In Hos 11:8-9, Hosea speaks of restoring the ruptured Yahweh-Israel relationship, using the parent-child metaphor. The rebellious child created an impasse in the parent-child relationship by abandoning him and going after other harmful and morally depraved influences. Here, restoration is possible only by an interruption of the impasse. If not for the intervention of a benevolent parent to help him out of this inclination, the child would perish.

In verses 8-9, Hosea presents the pathos of God trying to find a creative strategy that would mend their relationship. Yahweh, the parent, had two options available: either to take the legal route of expelling the rebellious child from the household (Deut 21:18-21) or to find a way out to save Israel from their misguided inclinations. Uniquely, God finds an answer within Himself that manifests God’s sovereignty, not in judgment and punishment but mercy. God can interrupt the inclination of human disobedience through His mercy.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (Hos 11:8-9).

The strategy of resolving the impasse created by human frailties through divine pathos can be considered the divine strategy of creative involvement towards restoration. Heschel (1962) explains this pathos as living care, an outgoing challenge, and dynamic relation between God and man. While passion is devoid of reason, pathos is “an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision

and determination,” which helps restrain negative emotions. It is never self-centered but directed outward.

Of course, the prophet narrates the divine strategy of resolving the break-up in the divine-human relationship. However, analogically, we can apply the technique in rectifying human relationships too.

The text permits us to draw a good strategy for resolving family problems, especially with adolescents and youth in decision-making and path-finding crises. Instead of giving into rash and impulsive anger in responding to children in situations narrated above, we need to take time. It may be a time of inner tension, concern for an amicable and lasting resolution that enables children to make decisions for themselves. Even when they retort angrily and contemptuously, compassionate and positive responses to children may make them reflect on their behavior sooner than later. In true-life situations, the pathos of God becomes real. Parents have a feeling of betrayal, rejection, and misunderstanding on the one hand. On the other hand, their inability to leave their children to suffer the fruits of their misdeeds. Hosea says, “their bowels recoil”: an expression that shows the emotional turmoil in making existential decisions.

Conclusion

I have attempted to delineate some Biblical models and resources for developing a tool for family therapy to effect reconciliation to restore a ruptured relationship. As *Amoris Laetitia* vividly points out, since so many factors threaten the stability of the family, it is essential to have tools “to offer guidance and counseling in areas related to growth in love, overcoming conflict and raising children” (AL 38). The document stresses the importance of forgiveness in keeping the family bond safe. Forgiveness is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people’s weaknesses and tolerate them (AL 105). As the Joseph Story and the Family Metaphor in Hosea show, there are ways to work out forgiveness and reconciliation to hold families together.

References

- Boadt, L. (1997). Genesis. The book of the beginnings. In W. R. Farmer, A. LoCocque, A. Levoratti, & D. L. Dungan (Eds.). (1998). *The International Bible Commentary*. Collegeville.
- Brodie, T. L. (2001). *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, & Theological Commentary*. Oxford.

- Dearman, J. A. (1998). The Family in the Old Testament. *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 52(2), 117-29.
- Wiesel, E. (1985). *Messengers of God: A true story of Angelic presence and the return to the age of miracles (Biblical portraits and legends)*, p. 179.
- Goldman, D. (1996). *Emotional Intelligence*. London.
- Guyette, F. (2004). Joseph's Emotional Development. *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32(3), 181-193.
- Heschel, A. J. (1962). *The Prophets*. New York, p. 285-298.
- <https://bible.org/seriespage/7-pursuing-reconciliation-genesis-4433-4528>
- https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf
- Philip, J. (2011). Yahweh's Speaking to the Heart of Israel: A Study of *dabar-al-leb* in Hos 2:14(16). *Bible Bhashyam*, 37, 1-19.
- Werhun, W. S. (2019). *Autonomy and authenticity: Joseph's personal journey towards freedom and truth* [Thesis]. Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Retrieved from <https://dlib.bc.edu>
- Westermann, C. (1986). *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, p.69.
- Wolff, H. W. (1974). *Anthropology of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia.