



HOW CAN BROKEN FAMILIES HEAL?

This is a tough question because it is very broad and personal. It is hard to know where to start because this question depends on a lot of variables. The nature of the offense. The parties involved. The willingness of others. The expectations one has for the other. But if there is one thing I want to communicate is that there is hope. At the very least there is healing for you as you consider investing in relationships that may lead to your own family.

The problem with broken relationships can be summed up in one word, sin. We live in a fallen world. Sin has affected our relationships since the time of Adam and Eve sinned and covered themselves in fig leaves. They were ashamed before God, each other, and of themselves. They were spiritually ashamed. Emotionally ashamed. Physically ashamed. The rest of their lives were spent wrestling with these insecurities and trying to live in a world of sin and yet have a relationship. When Cain and Abel were born this insecurity led to one brother killing the other because of jealousy. I've always thought that if you want to find answers to anything you have to go back to the Garden. The problem was sin.

When I was seven I experienced the broken family. My mom was packing our belongings and putting them in a car belonging to another man. "What's going on, mom?" We are leaving your father and we are never coming back again." "What? I don't want to go! I can't believe you're breaking up our family!" Caught in the middle of a custody battle....my mom and dad went to court where my brother and I ended up in a juvenile detention center. After a month or so my parents got back together. We drove home that day and my father died of a heart attack that very evening. Now I could sit here and place blame but that is not productive. The reality of it is that sin broke up my family and its effects took my father's life.

Everyone of us have a story. And we could sit here and debate who was right or wrong. But ultimately the common denominator is sin and there has to come a point in our life where we have to move toward healing.

In the Bible, the two men that inspire me the most when it comes to the healing process in broken families are Joseph and Judah. If you don't know the story, Joseph was the youngest of 12 brothers and he was favored by his father. Eventually, his brothers hated Joseph so much they sold him as a slave in Egypt. In the midst of this separation Joseph choose to be close to God. From the age of seventeen to thirty he went from being a slave to a prisoner, and ultimately to the second in command over the entire land of Egypt. In the process, he devoted his life to God.....he worked extremely hard in whatever he did.....he fought off temptation and remained pure....and he earned favor with everyone he came in contact with because of his character. Yet in all of this he had to wonder, "Why has God allowed me to be taken from my family?"

Judah on the other hand, was quite the opposite. He was the one came up with the idea and who influenced his brothers to sell Joseph to slave traders. After Joseph was sold Judah leaves his family and seeks out to start his own. But he did so without God. He probably felt he had no use for God because though his father was a follower—he only saw destructive patterns from him. So Judah becomes his own man and makes his own rules. First he marries an unbeliever. Later we discover the condition of his sons. His first two die because of wickedness in the sight of God. Later Judah's wife dies and his character is so bad that he sleeps with someone disguised as a prostitute. Three months later, when he hears his widowed daughter-in-law is pregnant he sets out to set her on fire in public. But in the process we come to discover that Judah didn't sleep with a prostitute—he slept with his daughter-in-law who wanted to have a kid so bad she baited the man who was supposed to provide his youngest son as her husband. Sadly, she knew that Judah would sleep with anyone if he had the chance to do it in private. Judah would declare his daughter-on-law to be the righteous one. That's Judah's dysfunctional past.

So we have two people here. One who loved God but was a victim of the evil intentions of his brother and one who rebelled against his family, God, and lived by his own twisted morals. Sounds like a normal family doesn't it? You got the guy who gets the good grades and the guy who is the school bully and takes people's lunches. One was a victim of

sin—the other was an advocate of sin. But still there is hope for the victim and the abuser. With God there is always hope. So in His providence God develops the storyline.

There was a famine. Judah and his brothers were told by his father they had to go to Egypt to provide food for their families. In the midst of this experience they encountered Joseph who they did not recognize. Joseph made them go back home and bring their youngest brother, who was Joseph's biological brother. Jacob, their father did not want to send Benjamin because he was afraid he would lose him like he lost Joseph. Finally, Judah confronts his father and shows his leadership. He places the boys return on his shoulders.

Genesis 43:8-9

And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. **9** I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.

Sounds like a nice story. But every good story needs a twist. Joseph provides one. He sets up the young Benjamin to appear as if he stole something belonging to Joseph. He concludes that all the brothers are free to return home, except Benjamin. He will remain in Egypt as a slave. But once again, Judah steps to the plate. He does the unthinkable and confronts Joseph—who he does not realize is the brother he sold. He offers to be a slave in the place of his young brother.

Genesis 44:30-44

Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, **31** as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. **32** For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' **33** Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. **34** For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father."

What a plea. Sometimes I wonder how Joseph felt listening to the man who he heard in the pit as a seventeen-year-old boy say, "Let's sell him to slave traders." There is an old saying, "we forgive—but we don't forget." As Joseph listened to the changed heart of Judah he couldn't take in any more.

Genesis 45:1-3

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. **2** And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. **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.

The text uses hyperbole here. Joseph cried so that all the Egyptians heard it, even the Pharaoh and his household. You know what was happening here for Joseph? He was experiencing healing. His brothers on the other hand were experiencing a new kind of fear they had never felt—but nevertheless healing was occurring. Joseph did not want to take vengeance against his brothers. He had every right. What could keep such a man from not retaliating? There are really two answers. One, he recognized that God had orchestrated his life, the good and bad. Two, he saw a change in the dispositions of his brothers and a man step up to the plate in Judah. Now that doesn't mean that all the pain went away. All the pain can't possibly go away in this lifetime. But there is still an opportunity to experience healing.

I've listed some important biblical principles here that led to some healing with Judah and Joseph.

Judah's Path to healing

1. Judah experienced pain

CS. Lewis once said, "God uses pain to rouse a deaf world." Sometimes that is the only thing that will get our attention. Judah rebelled against God and lost his wife and two sons. He also came face-to-face with what he had become when he recognized that he slept with his daughter-in-law.

2. Judah left his environment

We find out that Judah left the place where he raised a painful family and returned back to his father's household. There was nothing left for him where he lived but bad memories. This is one of the most important steps to becoming healthy, especially if your crowd is involved with drugs like Meth. There has to come a point where you surround yourself with healthy people who want to better themselves.

3. Judah became a leader during a time of crisis

When Benjamin had to go to Egypt with Judah for them to survive, Judah took responsibility for the safety of the boy. Someone had to step up and take the leadership of the family. And in a time of crisis the family is waiting for someone to direct them through the pain.

4. Judah was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the family

When Benjamin's safe return was jeopardized—Judah offered to be a servant for Joseph in place of his brother. If you really want to promote healing in the family it will involve sacrifice to some degree.

Joseph's path to healing

1. Joseph served God despite the circumstances

I can't imagine the betrayal Joseph must have felt by his brothers. He was going to a foreign country as a teenager and was now the property of slave traders. One could easily conclude his life was over. But he did the only thing he could do that was positive. He trusted God.

2. Joseph developed good relationships through his work ethic

Joseph found favor when he worked with Potiphar and with the prison guards. It seemed everything he did brought about some sort of prosperity. This is why he became second in charge at Potiphar's home. Why he developed good relationships with the prison guards and the cupbearer in prison. Finally, his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream—although Joseph rightly attributed it to God—found so much favor with the Egyptian ruler he became second in charge in all of Egypt. Those 13 years of having a good work ethic earned him influential relationships.

3. Joseph recognized God's providence in his life

This became evident when Joseph told his brothers that what they meant for evil God meant for good so that Joseph could save many lives. He did not seek vengeance because he recognized how God scripted the story of his life.

4. Joseph was able to forgive by the power of God

Joseph lived in Egypt with his brothers for eighty more years. He had every opportunity to due them in but instead he helped them to prosper in the land. That kind of forgiveness only comes from having a complete trust in God. You may think I can never forgive what one of my family members did to me? That might be true in your own state of mind. But if you cling to God you can begin the process of forgiveness. Maybe the forgiveness won't be complete—but that won't really happen until heaven anyway.

Objections

1. The story of Judah and Joseph has a happy ending. But not all families experience that kind of healing?

That is true. Not all relationships heal like this one. Some families never experience the healing process. I find this to be true when no one in the family thinks they need to take steps to heal. There are other people in families that just don't know how. However, as one family therapist said, "Change one person and it affects the dynamic of the family." One person kind of shifts the equilibrium. If you are in a family where no one wants to change the best thing you can do is work on yourself and form healthy patterns and boundaries. Since your family knows you well—they can anticipate how you'll respond in a given situation. Do you get defensive when you're criticized? Does your family expect you to talk

negatively about other family members? Do they expect you to take sides? By submitting your life to Jesus you are committed to following his healthy examples when it comes to relationships. Remember, all it takes is one person to alter the family dynamic. And even if they won't change—you can by developing godly behaviors and establishing boundaries so you won't be in a position to sin or be taken advantage of. But in the process love your family and respect them. Don't talk down to them. It is important to note that although Joseph's family was leaving in Egypt—Joseph was not living with them. They lived in Goshen—Joseph lived in the Pharaoh's palace where he was raiding his own family. The reality is that boundaries are necessary when it comes to healing broken families.

2. I can't reconcile because of extensive emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.

In reality there are many people who have experienced all three of these negative abuses. You may be one of them. The reality is that there are times when the hurt seems too deep to heal. If this describes you I am sorry that you were taken advantage of by family members. That never should have happened. There are two things I want you to consider. First, we live in a fallen world where sin has destroyed people. It is easy to focus on the individual and not the sin. Sin causes people to feel insecure and take advantage of others. Sin causes one to have complete disrespect for someone. Sin makes a person selfish, controlling, jealous, and just plain evil. You may never be able to forgive someone completely in this life. But you have to work in the bitterness and hurt that you feel inside. That is where committing your life to Jesus begins the process.

Secondly, if you have been a victim of abuse, having a healthy relationship with someone else outside your family will be hard to do. The key is for you to get healthy so you can develop safe relationships with others. This is where having some form of counseling can be very helpful. One of the hardest things for people who have been abused is not only to have an intimate relationship with someone else—but to form these relationships with people who are safe and seeking to better themselves relationally. The reality is that many times we are drawn to the same type of unhealthy people who have hurt us in the past. For example, the person that has been abused is often drawn to the "bad boy" and feels uncomfortable around people they consider "too nice." So the challenge is to work on you and to find healthy people to have relationships with.

When it came to bad relationships Jesus raised the bar when it came to people we might consider our enemies. He said to love them and to pray for those that persecute you. On the surface this sounds absurd because the last thing anyone wants to do is to love someone that has hurt them. The primary reason Jesus said this I believe is to work on yourself and the feelings that are going on inside. God wants us to develop the kind of heart that epitomizes love. Praying for the goodwill of those who persecute us will separate us from the pack and change us from within. It is true you may never be able to have a relationship with a person that hurt you—but you work on yourself so that you can have those safe relationships in the future. So why does Jesus command us to pray for those that persecute us?

Healing the Ultimate Broken Relationship

It is because he died for us and he wanted to heal the broken relationship that existed between us and God. Because of sin everyone was affected. The reality is that God cannot be around sinful people because He is Holy. So He sent Jesus to die for our sins. Jesus was able to do this because he lived a perfect life before God and did not sin. Then he did the unthinkable. He placed the sins of the world upon his shoulders—the sins of the past, present, and future—and nailed them with himself to the cross. He took those that have sinned against you and experienced their intense pain. He cried out to the father in agony, "Why have you forsaken me" because that is exactly how we feel toward God when

we are victimized by someone. And within the context of this reality God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus and raised him from the dead. And if you have a heartfelt conviction this event in history is true and accept Jesus as your Savior your broken relationship with God is healed. You see, Jesus is in the business of healing broken relationships. When you understand that you can better understand why he wants us to work toward forgiving other people who have hurt us. He is not telling you to do something he wasn't willing to do.

In the end, Jesus died for sin because it is the cause for broken relationships. You have to understand that it is not the person who sets out to hurt you—it is the sin within the person. When you understand that sin is a serious issue you can sort of grasp why Jesus knew it was necessary to die for them. Finally, as you begin the healing process the most important step is to confess your own sin to Jesus and repent of them—which just means to turn away from them and live your life in a better direction. When you do this Jesus gives you the power to begin the process of healing broken relationships. It is not easy—but it is the right path to take.