



# FORGIVENESS FUNDAMENTALS

A HEALING HANDBOOK

## FOREWORD

A thoughtless word is spoken, feelings are hurt, anger takes root, and distance grows in the relationship. Then, the cycle repeats; everything feels stuck. We don't know how to move forward. Sound familiar?

The harsh truth is that we all fail each other. We are sinful beings. We all hurt those we love and are hurt by others in return. Injury and anger are inescapable and require life's most essential relationship skill: the healing power of forgiveness. Many skills, like communication and conflict management, are valuable, but they are steps to the deeper gift of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, relationships crumble and hearts wither.

The good news is that, even in the worst of situations, where deep hurt and painful transgressions have occurred, there is hope for forgiveness and healing. This resource is designed to help you navigate the messy journey of forgiveness. Whether you have questions about the nature of forgiveness, the process of forgiveness, or how to handle difficult relationships moving forward, we hope to provide you with some tools for developing the essential skill of forgiveness.

Start your journey by exploring scripture's call to forgive. Then, revisit the basics of forgiveness, explore helpful suggestions for how you might forgive, and grapple with the difficult realities of forgiveness in action.

When we forgive, we trade the weight of our resentment for the joy and peace of restoration. We are freed from the bondage of anger and invited into a life guided by the work of the Spirit. When this happens, the fruits of the Spirit are free to flourish in our lives.

There are many skills we can improve in our relationships, from demonstrating thankfulness to communicating effectively, to managing conflict. All of these skills are good, but forgiveness is the most essential relationship skill, a foundation for the others.

We pray these writings are a blessing to your life and that your relationships experience the blessing of forgiveness.

Grace and Peace,

*Steven & Deb Koster*

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## CHAPTER 1: SCRIPTURE'S CALL TO FORGIVE

# Forgiving One Another

by Leonard Vander Zee

Each night my wife and I say the Lord's Prayer together. Over the years we've found the greatest benefit of this simple ritual is that every night we pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

When Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, this petition is the only one that he commented on. "For if you forgive others...your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others... your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). Forgiveness is so close to the heart of God and so essential for Christ-followers that their own forgiveness hangs in the balance.

Every day sin and hurt of some kind mars every person, every relationship, every family. In the normal course of a day, the friction that comes with close contact flames into animosity, little tensions blow up into big arguments, and hasty words give birth to deep hurts. Without forgiveness, it's hard to see how relationships can survive, or how families can function. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive..." becomes a divinely appointed safety valve, releasing the tensions, working through the hurts.

Of course, it's one thing to pray about it and it's another thing to do it. Forgiveness is one of the hardest things to practice in our close relationships. And the degree of difficulty increases with the degree of hurt we've experienced. We may easily dismiss someone leaving dirty dishes in the sink (unless it's done day after day, of course), but when betrayal darkens a relationship, or violence threatens a family, forgiveness costs dearly.

A fallacy about forgiving is that one can do it easily and right now—perhaps for some small infraction, but not

for the big sins that hurt and haunt. For those, it takes time, and prayer, and searching the heart. We might end up praying for help with forgiveness much like the man in the gospels who prays for faith (Mark 9:24), "Lord, I'm struggling to forgive, help my unforgiveness."

***Ultimately, our ability to forgive is related to the depths at which we know and understand how much we have been forgiven.***

Likewise, one of the oldest and most familiar adages about forgiveness turns out to be untrue—forgive and forget. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting, as though we can wipe a memory from our minds like deleting a word on the computer. Forgiveness remembers and releases at the same time. But it doesn't remember with bitterness, it remembers with compassion. That's what's so hard about it.

Ultimately, our ability to forgive is related to the depths at which we know and understand how much we have been forgiven. It is more than a momentary act; it's a movement that flows from Jesus' cross into our lives. If our unforgiving hearts refuse to let God's forgiveness flow through us, when grace stops with us, it will stagnate like a stopped-up pond.

As we pray, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," we're reminded that we all live by forgiveness. God's grace and forgiveness is meant to flow through us, and our families, and finally, through the whole world.

## CHAPTER 2: THE BASICS OF FORGIVENESS

# Why Forgive?

*by Deb Koster*

People can be cruel and exasperating. Friends betray our trust and leave us hurting. Often, we'll recite long lists of offenses that someone has committed against us. We may be completely justified in our anger, but living with ongoing bitterness toward others will only cause us further pain and distress. Thankfully, like an antidote to poison, forgiveness has meaningful benefits, not only for our perpetrators, but for us! Here are six good reasons to forgive:

### 1. Forgiving sets you free

Lewis Smedes is a powerful author on the topic of forgiveness. In his book, [Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve](#), he says, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." Forgiveness is not so much for the benefit of the ones who have hurt us, it is for us; it's for you. Forgiveness sets us free from anger, from our need to get even, and allows us to move forward, with or without reconciliation. Forgiveness frees us from the gridlock of hatred and enables us to live our lives without carrying the weight of resentment.

### 2. Forgiveness removes the offender's power

Allowing anger toward someone to take up residence in our headspace gives the offender power. Do I really want to give more power to someone who has proven to be untrustworthy? When we are locked in fear and anger we give the offender control of our emotions. We spend our energy on their behavior. However, we can decide to let go of our desire for vindication and come to see the offender as a small and broken person. That's how they look in God's eyes!

### 3. Forgiving is the courageous option

Remaining angry and walking away is the easy answer. Our culture is quick to move past relationships that do not meet my needs. It is easier to separate ourselves from difficult people than to persist in challenging relationships. Forgiveness requires us to bravely choose grace rather than retribution. It is choosing not to live in anger, to release our need to be vindicated, and to allow God to be responsible for exacting justice. In cases of strong offense, forgiveness does not require that you reconcile and restore the relationship to its original boundaries. Hopefully in most instances forgiveness leads to reconciliation, but there may also be times when reconciliation does not, and should not, occur. You might think that you can't forgive because it will make you a doormat and allow the perpetrator more opportunities to hurt you, but forgiveness and reconciliation are distinctly different things. You can forgive an abusive offender without ever setting foot in their presence again. Forgiving is always the courageous option.

### 4. Forgiveness brings healing

Forgiveness is at the top of life's most important skills for healthy relationships. Because of our broken, sinful condition, it is inevitable that selfishness is going to creep into our relationships now and again. We all mess up and need forgiveness periodically. Every time someone disappoints us, we have a choice in how we respond. We can build walls of resentment or we can build bridges of reconciliation. Walls of resentment will ultimately sever relationships or cripple them with pain. Forgiving not only releases anger, but also is the first step toward reconciliation and restoration. Forgiveness begins the most powerful path to healing our relationships.

## 5. Forgiveness is better for your physical health

Bitterness rots us from within. We were not designed to hold onto anger. Anger degrades into bitterness and corrodes our insides. It can make us physically sick. Bitterness is a constant stressor on our bodies and hearts. We need the healing that comes with letting go of anger and allowing peace to restore us within.

## 6. Forgiveness aids spiritual health

We are instructed in scripture to forgive as we have been forgiven. In Matthew 6:12, Jesus taught his disciples to pray saying, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." He wants us to be in the habit of forgiving others and allowing judgment

to be his job and not ours. Jesus says in Matthew 6:15, "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Jesus does not want our attitude of unforgiveness toward others to impact our own forgiveness and spiritual health.

Learning to forgive can be the most healing lesson we could ever learn. It is not easy, but God will give us the strength to forgive. Forgiveness will free us to live life without the burden of bitterness and free our bodies and souls to find rest in God. Ephesians 4:31-32 instructs us, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." And ultimately the best reason to forgive is because Christ Jesus in his greatest act of compassion has graciously chosen to forgive us!

# 5 Things Forgiveness Is and Isn't

by Deb Koster

So many unhealthy ideas about forgiveness float around and cause confusion. Does forgiving mean instant reconciliation? Can we ever really forgive and forget? How easy is it to forgive? How long should it take?

With misguided understandings of forgiveness, our pursuit of forgiving can lead to unproductive paths instead of the healing process. Don't let your journey to healing get derailed by bad definitions of what it means to forgive. Here are some crucial basics for what forgiveness really is and is not:

## **Forgiveness IS...**

### **1. Forgiveness is a gift to myself**

When I withhold forgiveness, the person I hurt the most is myself. Our offenders may not even know that we are angry with them, and if they do, they may not care. When we don't forgive, we hold ourselves hostage by our own anger. Offenders have only the power that we give them—forgiveness is letting go of our anger, our right to be right, and our claim to retribution. When we forgive, the person we help most is ourselves.

### **2. Forgiveness is a process**

Forgiveness is trusting God to be in charge of establishing justice. The psalmist cries out over and over again for God to bring justice to the world and he trusts God one day to make everything right. Forgiveness is not a one-and-done proposition. We are fragile broken people and we may need to turn our hurts over to God a number of times before we are able to let them rest there. Don't be discouraged if you find yourself handing God the same pain day after day. God gladly accepts it, and eventually, you will stop needing to hand it over.

## **Forgiveness IS NOT...**

### **1. Forgiveness is not forgetting**

Forgiveness is not pretending that an offense never happened. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring the hurt, pain, and damage involved. That is denial, not forgiveness. "Forgive and forget" may be a familiar saying, but it has little basis in reality—we mere people can't just wipe our memories clean as if nothing happened. God chooses to remember our sins no more, but we remember and learn from our hurts.

### **2. Forgiveness is not dwelling on the pain**

Just because we remember our hurt does not mean we should continually focus on the memories of those offenses. Forgiveness is not fixation on past wrongs. We remember, but we don't dwell on or let our hurt define us. If the pain and past is where we dwell, we have not yet fully forgiven; we still need to give that offense back to God. Remember it is a process. Love keeps no record of wrong, so we must choose, again and again, to live in that love.

### **3. Forgiveness is letting go of being a victim**

Forgiveness frees us from being defined by our pain and allows us to move forward without anger. When we acknowledge our pain, it shows that we have a healthy respect for ourselves. But your pain does not define you. And instead of “forgiving and forgetting,” we should remember and establish good boundaries to prevent future sin. Acknowledging honestly the pain of the situation will equip us for releasing anger and setting healthy boundaries going forward.

### **4. Forgiveness is commanded in scripture**

We are told throughout scripture to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is beyond comprehension. Christ forgave us while we were still sinning. Christ forgave us though he knew the pain that we would cause him. Christ forgave us through great sacrifice. We are told to follow Christ’s example! Through our own strength it is not possible to forgive like this. It is only through the power of the Spirit at work within us that we can begin the work of true forgiveness.

### **5. Forgiveness is seeing others through God’s eyes**

Forgiveness is seeing offenders as God sees them—as broken individuals who are acting out of their own hurt and dysfunction, and yet also as his image-bearing children in need of grace. We are blessed when we are able to see beyond our own pain to view life’s villains from God’s perspective; it gives us a much needed kingdom outlook on the situation!

The forgiveness that comes from God is not trivial or superficial, it is so much richer. Understanding what forgiveness is and is not helps us to begin the journey realistically and poised for success. Forgiveness may not look quite how our culture portrays it, but as we step into the process, we discover that God’s plan is much richer and deeper than what our culture is offering.

### **3. Forgiveness is not being a doormat**

Forgiveness does not mean we must allow an offender the opportunity to continue to sin and hurt others. When we forgive, we let go of our anger, but we must also take active steps to keep the perpetrator from hurting us again. In cases of repeated offense or abuse, we absolutely must protect our ourselves and those we love because we have value as children of God. It does no one any good to allow an abuser a chance to abuse again.

### **4. Forgiveness is not reconciliation**

Many times reconciliation will follow forgiveness. But not every relationship will or should be reconciled after forgiveness occurs. We can forgive someone without ever receiving an apology or even the offender’s participation. Some will never acknowledge the hurt that they have caused. Their behavior may never change. We do not need to give unrepentant people access to our vulnerabilities. Rather, we can develop healthy boundaries that protect us from further harm.

### **5. Forgiving is not easy**

Forgiving real hurt is difficult. We will likely have to turn that pain over to God repeatedly, but don’t give up just because it is difficult. It takes strength and courage to release our right to be right, our need for vindication. God gives us the strength to forgive, all we have to do is ask. Forgiveness is a difficult task, but it is worth the effort.

## CHAPTER 3: HOW TO FORGIVE

# Forgiveness: A Process to Help You Get Started

by Lynne Scherschel

Whether we like it or not, God commands us to forgive when others wrong us. There are no qualifiers and no exception clauses to the command. God just instructs, “Forgive!” Additionally, He said that if we do not forgive others, our sins won’t be forgiven either (Matthew 6:14-15). It’s evidence of how we are remade by the Spirit’s love. We are expected to forgive no matter what the circumstances and no matter how many times we are offended—seventy times seven, as Jesus puts it (Matt. 18:21-22). The number seven signifies perfection, so Jesus is saying we should forgive perfection upon infinity—he expects us to forgive countless times, just like our Father in heaven, because that’s who we are now. Forgiveness is a command, but also a chance to show our gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Even Jesus, our example in all things, forgave from the cross (immediately) those who were torturing and murdering him.

Should we do less? Of course not! But knowing that we should forgive doesn’t automatically or immediately translate into right action. Forgiveness is difficult and for many people it can be hard to know where to start.

### **So, how does one forgive? Here’s a method I’ve used:**

1. Decide to forgive. This is based on an act of will, not on feelings. It is a choice between obedience and rebellion.
2. Record the decision. Include the time, date, and location of your choice to forgive. This is an important part of walking it out.
3. Acknowledge your pain and pray for God’s grace. Your hurt is real, but God can carry it. Pray that you are able to hold fast to your decision no matter what happens—and things will happen! It is absolutely

God’s will that your heart changes toward the person you are forgiving, so when you ask him, he will grant your request (1 John 5:14-15).

4. Pray for the offender. Ask God to bless your offender in all possible ways. Acknowledge you don’t need to prove you’ve been wronged to release your anger. Pray for them because Jesus said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Try praying scriptures for them. Certainly, if they are not believers, pray for their salvation!
5. Remind yourself of your decision. Every time you think of the person or your hurt, write down a recommitment statement. You might write something like, “God, that was taken care of on X date, and I am counting on you to change my heart and help me to love \_\_\_\_\_. I know that this is totally impossible in my own strength, but I choose to continue to obey you and allow you to work in my heart by your Holy Spirit. With your help, I will now pray for \_\_\_\_\_ according to your heart and will for them.”
6. Refuse the enemy’s promptings and focus on God. When the enemy tempts you to anger or rekindles feelings a hatred toward your offender, remember that God has called you to love. God knows the whole truth and you don’t need vindication to move on. As you continue to refocus on God over and over again, your heart and mind will be healed and transformed. Eventually, you will remember the offense and the person without the pain and anger that you felt at the beginning. You will also experience God’s love in your heart for the person who offended you. Only God could accomplish that!

Remember, it may take time and progress will not always be immediately evident. And after you have

completed these steps, you will still have to think about what reconciliation looks like for the relationship between you and your offender.

### **How do you relate to your forgiven offender?**

There is not one right answer to this question, but here are some helpful guidelines.

1. Note that there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is dependent only on the wronged person (you), while reconciliation requires the cooperation of both parties.
2. Forgiveness is not synonymous with trust, forgetting, or readmittance.
3. Some people are simply not safe to be around—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—or to have

one's children around. We must forgive, but justice demands godly wisdom and strong boundaries.

4. Remember that the offender is a broken creature in need of God's grace, just as we all are. Genuine repentance and, above all, changed behavior are the keys to rebuilding trust and reconciliation
5. Be careful that you have actually forgiven the person and that you are not using safety as an excuse to continue to withhold forgiveness. If you feel like a victim that needs to be proven right, you may have more forgiveness work to do.

As you reflect on the way forward after forgiveness, ask God to reveal your heart's attitude to you and to guide you in any further relationship you may or may not have with the offender. Forgiveness may not result in a mended relationship, but if done with a right heart, it will always draw us closer to our forgiving God.

# Write a Letter of Lament and Forgiveness

by Steven Koster

Forgiveness is something we all want to receive, and truly, we all wish to give. We all want to be the bigger person, a gracious person, the kind of person who forgives others as God has forgiven us. But it's not always that easy. Some of us have been hurt badly and even abused in horrific ways. We bear not only scars, but bleeding wounds of fear, anger, and resentment towards those who have mistreated us. We want to forgive, but how?

Here's one idea: write a letter of lament and forgiveness to the person who hurt you. You may never send it, but writing it down on paper will help it weigh less heavy on your heart. A Letter of Lament and Forgiveness should include the following elements.

1. Open the letter with your intention. Be sure to name the hurt and communicate your desire to forgive. Include a prayer for the Holy Spirit to give your voice strength and your heart courage so that you may forgive as you have been forgiven by God in Christ.
2. Name the offenses. List the abuses. Articulate in words the actions the offender did to hurt you. Put it all down on paper and give it full voice. Don't let the secrets hide in the shadows, but shine a light on deeds done in the dark. Evil things wither in the sunlight of truth, so let the truth be told. Writing down the offenses establishes that these deeds were real, and truly painful. That is an important part of the journey.
3. Describe the impact on you. How have these actions hurt you? How have they affected your life? What impact have they had on your heart, your relationships, your health, your family, your work? Lament for what was lost and for the results that followed in your life.
4. Offer forgiveness. Release the right to revenge and vindication. Give your offender's accountability to God so that he can enact justice in his time. Acknowledge the offender's humanness, smallness, and brokenness. Seek some pity and even sympathy for someone so broken, so hurt, so miserable that they would do these things, even when they probably knew better. Release them to become God's problem.
5. Set boundaries. Point out that forgiveness is not reconciliation, and that there may not be any restoration of the relationship. Forgiveness does not mean your offender will be able to return to a place where they can hurt you again. State what limits you will set around them in the future.
6. Write an honest prayer to God for the offender. Ask God to work in their lives as a blessing, not a curse. Try to see them as God does—as a broken image-bearer of God desperately in need of a Savior. Truly wish them well within the boundaries you've set.
7. Re-state your words of release and forgiveness. Then, sign it, and date it. You've now lamented your pain, forgiven your perpetrator, and released them to God.

***This letter can be a visible reminder of the pain that you have released to God that you no longer need to carry on your heart.***

Next, decide what to do with the letter. You might burn it. You might keep it safe as a token of your forgiveness. You might read it to someone who can bear witness to your story. You might even send it to the offender.

But now, at least, it's all on paper, not on your heart. This letter can be a visible reminder of the pain that you have released to God that you no longer need to carry on your heart. God receives all the prayers of our hearts and longs to carry our burdens. Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

As you complete this exercise, may you experience God's peace and feel the lifting of your burden.

Remember, it is natural to want to pick back up the emotional weight of your hurt. You may need to turn it over to God repeatedly before you can move on without bitterness and be able to pray for the person who has hurt you. Don't be hard on yourself, just relinquish that burden back into God's hands. Forgiving is painful and difficult, but God will equip you with the strength to do it and it will be worth the effort.

## CHAPTER 4: FORGIVENESS IN ACTION

# Forgiving the Villains

*by Deb Koster*

The destructive behavior of malicious offenders can splinter our world and leave painful scars that erode our capacity to trust. An abusive ex-husband, a vindictive co-worker who spreads lies, a relative that molested you; they often go on with life, seemingly without an ounce of remorse or any interest in seeking our forgiveness. We try to move on, but we find ourselves drawn back in. Hearing the name of our offender stirs up a storm of emotions. With each memory we relive the pain, and with every moment of grief, the wound reopens. Those who wounded us deeply may never recognize, nor care, about the pain they caused. We feel alone as we bear the weight of the injury. So how do we move on with life when our offender remains unrepentant?

### Recognize the wound

Healing begins when we acknowledge our pain and the way that it has impacted us. When we ignore our wounds they don't find healing. If we let past wounds go unaddressed, they have a way of resurfacing to poison current relationships. Fixating on our wounds may cause us to exaggerate the injury, so, look carefully at your wounds and make a genuine account of your pain. An honest acknowledgment of the injury starts us on a path to healing—even if that healing is only for ourselves. We must accept that our relationship with our offender may never find restoration.

### Seek healing

This may sound obvious, but it needs to be said. Sometimes we get comfortable living with our anger and we stop seeking healing. We don't want to forgive because we know that we were in the right and their behavior was awful—we believe we deserve vindication. The sin committed against us seems so

offensive that to forgive our offender seems to deny the hurt that we experienced. The truth is that the pain is real and that our offender may not deserve to be forgiven, but we won't find peace until we follow God's lead. God forgave all of us while we were yet sinners and not because we deserved it. We must make a conscious choice to set aside our anger. Our pain is real, but in light of God's love, no one owes us anything. We can't wallow in the pain and expect to find peace; the two are not compatible. We must release anger to enjoy the blessings that God can bring out of difficult situations.

### Do it for you

Forgiving in these difficult situations has little to do with the other person. Instead, and it has everything to do with finding personal healing. Forgiving offenders frees us from imprisonment to anger and addiction to our right to be right. In fact, the other person may never want or merit our forgiveness, but we do it anyway, because it is not for their sake that we forgive. Choose healing even if you are the only one in the situation who gets well. You were not made to be a slave to anger. Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Find freedom for yourself by turning your anger over to God.

### Find closure

Sometimes we simply do not have the option of reconciling with those who have hurt us. Maybe those who caused us pain are deceased or are no longer part of our lives. We may try to "move on with our lives," but still struggle to find a way forward when forgiveness and restoration haven't come to pass. In these situations, we must pursue closure even when

it does not come naturally. Journaling, letter writing, and prayer can be extremely helpful as outlets for pain that can never be communicated to or received by our offender. As we pour out our hearts to God, his Spirit can fill us with peace and bring supernatural restoration.

## Practice grace

We might be forced to interact regularly with those who have hurt us and yet refuse to claim ownership for their behavior. It is tempting to continue living in anger toward that person, but doing so will only hurt us more. Co-parenting with a person whose behavior is toxic or enduring tense family gatherings are challenging situations. But we seek ways to release our anger constructively and exhibit grace toward our offender. It takes a lot of maturity to recognize that our offender is a broken individual who hurts others out of weakness, and to refuse to get drawn into their drama. Practicing grace toward our offender is not easy, but God's grace is sufficient to get us through even the most difficult situations. The key is to remember how God sees them—broken, small, and in need of a savior.

## Set limits

Forgiveness should not always lead to reconciliation. Some people's behavior is so destructive that we cannot allow them back into our world. An unrepentant abuser should not get additional chances to harm us or our family. In these cases, relationships may need to be severed, or at the least, strong boundaries must be established. Forgiving an abuser offers us the chance to let go of our anger, but it does not mean that we should make ourselves vulnerable to further abuse. We all bear the image of God and as his children we take care not to let God's image be tarnished. Show love where you can, but set limits around bad behavior to protect you and your family.

## Don't go it alone

We can become too immersed in the situation at times to find our own way out. The pain done to us may feel unforgivable, but know that no brokenness is beyond God's capacity to bring healing. What feels impossible to us is not outside of God's ability. Sometimes the pain is so deep that we need help to release it and a trained pastor or counselor can help guide us on our journey to healing. We don't have to be stronger or tougher. Sometimes all we need to do is ask for help. Trust that God can handle the situation. Pursue wise counsel and leave things in God's capable hands.

## Allow time

Deep wounds don't heal in a day. Turning our pain over to God and releasing our right to be right may need repetition. It is not time that heals wounds, but God's working overtime that gains us perspective. If we won't allow God to be in charge of justice and trust him with the weight of our anger, we may continue to linger in bitterness years down the road. It can seem discouraging to keep turning over the same burdens to God day after day, only to find them back on your shoulders. But take heart and know that you are developing a healthy routine—creating muscle memory for trusting God. It develops with time spent focused in the right direction.

Forgiving the villains in my life is never easy, but I am never alone. God walks with us through every heartache in our lives. Jesus knows the pain of betrayal and abuse, he understands our grief. But God desires more for us than a life enslaved to anger. Titus 3:3 tells us, "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." We were stuck in that anger until "the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared." In God's grace, we find the capacity to extend grace. In our Savior's love we can release even the deepest of anger and rediscover peace and joy.

# Forgiving God

*by Deb Koster*

Forgiving God. It sounds like an irrational act. He has not sinned. God is good and has done us no wrong. God is sovereign over all of creation. He does not need our forgiveness. Yet our hearts can still be angry at God. We can carry a grudge against God. We may feel punished by God, or resent that he didn't do one thing or stop another like we wanted him to. Over time, our anger drives a wedge of distance into our relationship with him. Although our anger may be misplaced, our healing can be found only when we forgive God and release the anger that we hold toward him. He doesn't need it, but we do. And it's OK—he can take it.

## Ask God your difficult questions

It is not uncommon to wrestle with God over difficult questions. Where is God when his people are suffering? Intellectually, we know that our God of love does not cause pain and suffering, but it is hard to reconcile the power and goodness of God with the reality of pain that we experience in this earthly life. Why should a whole community be wiped out by a disaster? Why should a young father face cancer? Why must a parent grieve the loss of a child? We are left to wonder where God fits in and why he doesn't exercise his power to end pointless suffering. Asking these kinds of questions doesn't mean that we lack faith, it means that we are human. We can find God through the exercise of questioning. When we face God in our doubts and anger, we will find him faithful.

## Express your feelings (like a psalmist)

God is big enough to hear our pain and bear the weight of our sorrows. It may seem wrong to express anger toward God, but lament is healthy. Too often we turn from God in shame over our anger instead of inviting him to carry our burden of pain. Our loving God

does not cause our pain nor does he sit distant to our struggles. He grieves with the pain of our heart and walks with us through every step, even when our eyes are too filled with frustration to recognize his presence. He longs to hear the cry of our hearts and he grieves with us.

The psalms are full of raw human emotion: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” The words of the psalms cry out to God in anger, they question God's faithfulness, they grieve with abandonment, they make demands on God's faithfulness, and they find joy and peace through trust in God. The psalmist is not afraid to express his darkest feelings to God.

Psalm 13 offers a model of what it looks like to offer lament and move on to forgiveness. The psalmist moves through four movements: an expression of anger and grief, an expression of what's wrong, an expression of what he wants God to do about it, and finally an expression of trust. The psalmist moves back to trust in God with a recognition of God's unfailing love. This biblical model is one we can embrace to move toward healing and reconciliation with God.

You might consider this pattern for yourself. Write your own Psalm of Lament. Write four brief sentences or paragraphs. Express your anger and grief, express the details of what's wrong, express what you want God to do about it, and finally express your trust that the faithful God of merciful justice will make things right.

## Be okay without answers

When we are angry with God, we don't get to look him in the eye and demand an explanation. Job never fully understood the cause of all of his suffering. Likewise, we will not always see God's plan clearly until we meet him in heaven. For now, our vision is cloudy; as 1

Corinthians 13:12 tells us, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” God may not give us the whole plan upfront, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t with us or that he doesn’t care. He mourns every tear that falls and we know Jesus wept over the pain of this world.

### **Recognize your position**

As mere humans who cannot fathom the mind of God nor discern his greater plan and purpose, we struggle to see how God works through the pain in our lives. Romans 11:34 asks, “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” We are out of our depth when we begin to second guess God’s plan for our lives. As the clay does not get to tell the potter how to structure his creation, we are not in a position to tell God how to run his world. God listens to our heartache because he loves us, but the reality is that we don’t get to be in charge.

### **Choose trust**

The psalms guide us to trust God even when we are unsure of what God is doing. There is nothing easy about trusting when you feel broken. It is an exercise of trust to release our anger to God. In speaking our heart’s emotions, we acknowledge that God is big enough to handle our pain and loving enough to be trusted with our heart.

So does God need to be forgiven? Of course not. Do we need to move through the process of expressing and releasing our anger to God? Absolutely! God is looking for sincere hearts willing to come to him with all of their baggage. His desire for us in Romans 12:1 is that we “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” Handing over our burdens frees us to love God unhindered. Our relationship with God grows closer as we courageously bring our grievances to God and trust that God, in his goodness, has the better plan.

# The Power of Apology

by Deb Koster

An apology takes great courage. Admitting to having hurt others and asking for forgiveness is not for sissies. Apologizing involves claiming ownership over how we have intentionally or unintentionally caused pain in someone's life. Being willing to face someone we have hurt and asking to restore the relationship takes a special bravery.

Recently I experienced an example of such courage.

At breakfast, I sat with a wounded heart at a cafeteria table. A colleague's hurtful words from the night before still rang in my ears. I had spent half the night replaying the conversation in my head—what was said, what I wished I had said, how I could have made my point more clearly.... My body was weary from lack of sleep and my heart was heavy from being insulted by someone I had considered a friend.

Suddenly this same colleague approached my table and said, "I just want to apologize for how I spoke to you last night. I thought afterwards about what you were saying and I feel I came off too strong. I didn't mean to be dismissive." The humility and grace in his voice were jarring to my heart. I was stunned by his compassion.

I could have let him off easy and said, "Don't worry about it, no offense was taken." But I am too honest for that kind of superficiality. Instead I said, "Thank you for saying that, because I found your words to be very hurtful." The pain on his face was evident and he sat down at my table. Over the next few minutes we were able to share together and find the blessing of forgiveness and reconciliation. It was a gift, an act of building Christ's kingdom here on earth.

James 4 reminds us of the power of our words. Just as a single spark ignites a forest fire, our words can create destruction. Like the rudder of a ship, our tongue can steer us to peaceful or rocky shores. James 4:9-10 says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." Our words have the power to bless or to wound, to forgive or offend, so we must choose our words with care.

It could not have been easy for my colleague to ask for my forgiveness. It made him vulnerable. Even though he regretted the earlier conversation, he could have simply ignored it. That morning apology was guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. At that moment in the breakfast room, I saw what sacrificial love looks like. My colleague showed how much he valued our relationship by putting aside ego and pride and choosing to be vulnerable. He went from being a "mean boy" to a "super-hero" in my eyes.

***Forgiveness gives all of us a glimpse of God's kingdom here on earth.***

And in that moment I saw a reflection of the love of Jesus in my friend. He was willing to reach through pain to restore our fellowship. Jesus loved us enough to endure all manner of suffering to mend our relationship broken by sin. Forgiveness gives all of us a glimpse of God's kingdom here on earth.

Apologizing is never easy. It takes great courage. And the Holy Spirit equips us for the task.

# The Art and Grit of Granting Forgiveness

by Rob Toornstra

Recently, I found myself in conflict with a fellow believer. Hurtful words and actions were exchanged and it became necessary for us to do the hard work of repairing the relationship. That meant seeking and granting forgiveness.

***Forgiveness is never about forgetting or pretending that an offense was “no big deal.”***

We have all found ourselves in such a situation. Relationships can be messy and eventually every friendship, romance, or marriage will need to lean on the healing power of forgiveness to repair a wound. What does forgiveness look like? In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a story to illustrate the practice of forgiveness. In the parable, a deeply-indebted servant has his vast debt wiped out by a gracious king, only to turn around and demand that a co-worker immediately repay him a much smaller (though still significant) debt. One thing that is clear from this parable is that forgiveness is costly. The second servant owed the first the equivalent of 100 days' wages—and that's not pocket change.

Forgiveness is never about forgetting or pretending that an offense was “no big deal.” Any wrong in a relationship comes at a price: we either try to make the other person pay the price—through passive-aggressive behavior, by retaliating, or by harboring a grudge—or we choose to absorb that cost ourselves. We bear the hurt and we choose to release the offender from our anger or hatred. But neither one of these responses will lead to reconciliation.

Forgiveness is almost always a rugged path that we travel—a path that sometimes meanders, sometimes feels like sprinting up an incline, and sometimes feels like we might never arrive. What traits mark this path?

## Forgiveness entails anger

To be angry is to acknowledge that we have been wronged. Hurt and anger are the natural and appropriate responses to an injustice done to us. Allowing ourselves to feel the pain, and (when possible), expressing the pain to the one who caused it is a beginning step on the path of forgiveness.

## Forgiveness thrives with genuine repentance

There will be circumstances when it will be necessary to forgive a person who does not or cannot acknowledge their offense against us. But in any relationship, admitting our wrongs, and making a heartfelt commitment to change greatly helps the work of forgiveness. This can include taking agreed-upon steps that will help rebuild trust. For example, a husband who struggles with porn might agree to share his browser history with his wife, whenever she wishes. A wife might agree to demonstrate that she has cut off all contact with a rekindled flame. These steps exhibit honest remorse for the actions that hurt the other person in the first place.

## Forgiveness is rooted in the gospel

Our jaws drop when we read that the forgiven servant immediately demanded repayment from his colleague. Yet if the story described only the first servant demanding payment from the second, we would likely stand with the first servant. After all, the second owed no small amount! It's only when the second debt is compared to the first that we see how insignificant it really is. Whatever sins we have to forgive our spouses, our parents, our children, our friends, or our colleagues, they will always pale in comparison to the debt we owe

to God and the price he paid to forgive us. And here lies the key to helping us forgive. When resentment or the grudge resurfaces, the best thing we can do is ask the Holy Spirit to help us remember the ways that God has forgiven us the same sins. God has erased so much in us and he did so by giving his own son! Calling this to mind has a way of slowly but surely eroding the cold mass of unforgiveness that lies in our hearts.

### **Forgiveness takes time**

When you make the commitment to forgive, it is never instantaneous. The path of forgiveness runs along switchbacks, which can feel like taking steps backwards. Just when we think we've forgiven

someone for letting us down, a pang of anger will strike again. This isn't uncommon—and it usually isn't a sign that we are failing to make progress. Pain and anger may resurface from time to time, but gradually, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it will lessen.

Remember the Christian brother with whom I had a conflict? We met over coffee to address our broken relationship. We each had a chance to express our pain, and to ask—and grant—forgiveness. Some of the pain still lingers. But in time, I am confident that our commitment to forgiveness will help it fade. Walking the path of forgiveness isn't always easy, but in marriage, in family, and in community, it is vital and transformative. As a response to God's gracious forgiveness, make the commitment to walking the path of forgiveness!.

## A DEVOTIONAL

# The Posture of Forgiveness

by Deb Koster

### Colossians 3:12-14

*“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”*

**| Love can build bridges where chasms of anger used to divide.**

When we take on a posture of humility and meekness, patiently showing kindness and compassion, we set the stage for forgiveness and healing. In contrast, arrogance, pride, and impatience set the stage for continued anger and conflict. We have choices to make each day as we choose or refuse to lean into the kingdom vision that God has established for his people. We can choose love over hate because God chose us.

Love can build bridges where chasms of anger used to divide. This text reminds us that in forgiving we are following the example that Christ set for us. We serve a God who works patiently with us through all of our disobedience. We are forgiven time and time again when we did nothing to deserve God's mercy. God calls us to serve one another with his grace and compassion.

This booklet has been written with a deep desire for the forgiveness of heaven to be made visible in our relationships here on earth. We pray that each person who picks up this booklet will experience the peace and joy that come from laying down our burdens and walking with God through the tough work of forgiveness. Our God is great and he will equip you for the challenge!

### Prayer

*Gracious God, we thank you for forgiving us and setting an example for us to follow. We ask for your Spirit. Clothe us in a posture of humility so that we might be equipped to show kindness and compassion to those around us. Heal the brokenness of our hearts and bring healing to our relationships. Take from us the burdens that we carry and fill our lives with your joy and peace. In the powerful name of Christ Jesus and by the Spirit we pray, Amen.*

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