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# Journal of Family Research and Practice

*Forgiveness*

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
Pamela Consuegra, PhD  
*Editors*





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# JOURNAL INFORMATION

The Journal of Family Research and Practice (JFRP) is an annual publication of the Family Ministries Department of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and is released each year in conjunction with the Adventist Conference on Family Research and Practice (ACFRP). It is authored by various experts in the field and focuses on the same theme as the conference for that year. Each volume is primarily intended for professionals, practitioners, pastors, and lay-people in the North American Division (Bermuda, Canada, Guam/Micronesia, and the United States), but may be accessed in electronic form by anyone, worldwide.

Each volume is intended to be both academic and practical in nature, dealing with the day to day challenges that families face. The topics of each yearly volume have been identified as key issues relevant to today's families.

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
Pamela Consuegra, PhD

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# FOREWORD

For some time now, we have had the desire to create a professional journal that would benefit both researchers and practitioners who work with families. We are pleased to present to you the premier edition of the Journal of Family Research and Practice, a contribution of the Family Ministries Department of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to those who work with or study families.

We have invited professionals, practitioners, and very special contributors to write on different aspects of our theme for each of the issues that we will be covering. The theme for this year is Forgiveness and for this, we asked widely known and respected researchers like Dr. Everett Worthington, university professors like Dr. Grant Leitma and Dr. Katia Reinert, and professional therapists like Dr. Dave Jenkins.

We also invited two seminary professors, Dr. Jiri Moskala and Dr. Cedric Vine, who wrote about forgiveness in the Old and New Testaments. But some of our most meaningful writers were those who have been victims of trauma and abuse and who found in forgiveness a healing balm for their life of pain. We are very moved by the articles by Melissa DePaiva Gibson, Carolyn Lim, and Sarah McDugal and know you will find them very beneficial too. And we must make mention of our dear colleague and friend, Karen Holford, who is so incredibly talented and creative.

Who is this journal for? We want it to be a useful tool for professional counselors, pastors, and those who teach in the fields of social sciences. But we also want them to be down to earth and practical for those who want to explore the topic and who may benefit by learning from the experience of others as well as from the theoretical framework of these articles.

We trust that this issue of the journal will be beneficial to you, whether you are a researcher, practitioner, or one who has an interest in this topic, and that you will share it with others as they seek to learn and practice forgiveness.

Claudio Consuegra, DMin  
Pamela Consuegra, PhD  
Family Ministries Directors  
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# FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT ISN'T, WHAT IT IS, AND HOW TO DO IT

*This is a practical article. To help Christians understand forgiveness and practice it more often, quickly, and easily, I address three topics. First, I identify things that forgiveness is not, but sometimes is mistaken for. Second, I examine ways that psychologists who are Christians understand what forgiveness is and how that accords with (and sometimes adds to) historic Christian views of forgiveness. This brings together Christian pastoral practices and psychological practices. Third, I look at ways that individual Christians and congregations can become more forgiving. I suggest ways they can also help families and individuals within the congregation practice forgiveness better. That includes things to do as a congregation, interventions that counselors and pastors can use to help people who wish to practice forgiveness to do so, and things a Christian can do as an individual or family member to become more forgiving and help their loved ones forgive better. I conclude with a list of ten practical recommendations.*

## **Forgiveness: What It Isn't, What It Is, and How to Do It**

I am a Christian psychologist, and as such, I seek to bring into a harmonious marriage the practices of individual Christians, Christian families, pastors, and congregations with findings from both basic and applied psychology. My goal is to share an understanding with you so you can practice Christian forgiveness faster, more thoroughly, and with less effort as an individual, romantic partner, family member, pastor, counselor, and congregant.

When you finish reading this article, you should know—and be able to avoid—likely mistakes that sometimes are made when people, guided by Scriptural directives to forgive, confuse forgiveness with other things (like reconciling) or don't understand how forgiveness is intended to be applied. You'll have over 20 good ideas to

apply in your work, romantic relationship, family, congregation, preaching, and lay, pastoral, and professional counseling.

There will be four major sections in this article. The first describes things that forgiveness is not. The second tells what forgiveness is. Third, I'll describe how you can forgive quicker, easier, and more thoroughly. Fourth, I'll make some practical recommendations.

## **What Forgiveness Isn't**

### **Forgiveness Is Not One Thing**

Forgiveness is complex. There are four distinct types. Two are experienced mostly as a perpetrator, two more as victim.

**Divine forgiveness.** Seeking and receiving forgiveness from God is divine forgiveness. Divine forgiveness is of most concern within the Bible. That is the story of

the Bible, from God's merciful sacrificing animals to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness (Gen 3:21) to Jesus stepping into human history (Phil 2:6-8) as a sacrificial lamb for our sins (Jn 1:29) to Jesus on the throne of heaven praised by the assembled: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Rev 5:12).

**Self-forgiveness.** Self-forgiveness is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible. Self-condemnation is. We can easily see in Psalm 51, David's lament after being confronted by Nathan regarding his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and his direction of the murder of her husband, Uriah. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from you your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps 51:10-11).

It is clearly legitimate for Christians to forgive themselves after sin, but only if they have taken their moral transgression to God for divine forgiveness based on Jesus' redemptive death for us. Only God can remove our moral impurity by seeing it through the blood of Jesus. David had been told by Nathan, a prophet of God, "The Lord has taken away your sin" (II Sam 12:13; NIV). Yet David still experienced self-condemnation. He was self-condemning because of remorse in sinning against God, but also because his acts had unrepairable social fallout. Also, betraying Uriah (not being loyal to one who served him) and using his power illegitimately to coerce Bathsheba into a sexual relationship undoubtedly had psychological fallout raising issues of disloyalty and abuse of power. David was pathologically loyal to his son, Absalom, even as Absalom rebelled, and David was unwilling to legitimately use his power to combat Absalom.

Self-forgiveness is consistent with Scripture, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. After taking sin to God, seeking to repair or make amends for social damage done, and seeking to deal with psychological entanglements, we can try to forgive ourselves. We have developed and tested a self-forgiveness do-it-yourself (DIY) workbook to help (Griffin et al., 2015) based on my Christian book on self-forgiveness (Worthington, 2013).

**Societal forgiveness.** Sometimes organizations can engage in societal and social events around forgiveness. For instance, a leader of a country could apologize for historic wrongs done by the country or might speak forgiveness on behalf of a wronged country. Societal forgiveness also is found in intergroup relations. People in one group might hold a grudge against people in a rival group. Christians might be unable to forgive Muslims (or vice versa). Or, within a congregation, some might be unforgiving towards others over a past hurtful disagreement.

**Person-to-person forgiveness.** The fourth type of forgiveness is one person forgiving another for some transgression (or set of transgressions). This is what that I will discuss in the rest of this article.

## **Forgiveness Is Not Seeing Justice Done**

**Fairness versus reconciliation.** When we experience a transgression against us, that stimulates two urges. Fairness and reconciliation. Fairness is aimed at not allowing unfair advantage by punishing norm violations. But if society depended solely on punishing wrongdoers, it would be a pretty hostile place. To get along as a wounded society, workplace, denomination, church congregation, family, couple, or friendship,

we also need a drive to reconcile. These drives for fairness (or justice) and for reconciliation are usually at odds. In each situation, one is stronger than the other. Which does dominate is often entangled with self-interested motives. Which should dominate is a matter of spiritual discernment. God values both justice and reconciliation. The Holy Spirit—often through Scripture, other Christians, tradition, or sovereign working of God—leads us into restorative justice or peacemaking.

**Forgiveness is not just reducing our sense of injustice or our unforgiveness, anger, and resentment.** Forgiveness is often confused with anything that makes negative feelings subside. For example, we might think, “He got what he deserved. That was justice! I no longer feel resentment toward him. I must have forgiven him.” Not necessarily. We feel less resentment not because we forgave but because we saw the person receive natural consequences. Similarly, if we see a burglar of our home caught, pilloried in the news, taken to trial, convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated, we might feel no anger toward the person, no sense of lingering injustice. But that doesn’t mean we forgave.

There are many ways to reduce our sense of injustice besides seeing justice done. These include turning the matter over to God for divine justice or just relinquishing judgment, forbearing—simply not responding negatively for the sake of group unity or harmony—or accepting and moving on with life. Forgiving is none of those, though forgiveness might be combined with any or all.

The injustice gap is the difference between the way I would like a transgression resolved and the way I see it now (see Davis

et al., 2016). It is an ongoing sense of how much net injustice I see in a situation. If my teenaged daughter hurts my feelings, I might have a large injustice gap. If she shows remorse, the injustice gap shrinks. If she apologizes and makes amends, it shrinks more. If she asks for forgiveness, my injustice gap might collapse, and forgiveness is a slam dunk. But if she shows no remorse, doesn’t apologize, makes no amends, and continues to insult me anew each day, my injustice gap grows, and forgiveness becomes hard.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Impossible, Even in the Worst Cases**

This huge injustice gap is not, in principle, unforgivable. Practically speaking, though, it may be very difficult to transcend. It is possible. But, let’s face facts. Although it is not impossible, it is so hard that some people can’t do it. Sometimes something happens to an unforgiven transgressor to arouse a high level of empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love. For example, if the teen developed cancer—though she might never have asked for forgiveness for the harms done, most parents will quickly forgive. Their feelings of compassion and love fill up and overflow the injustice gap.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Always Required**

Whenever we are hurt or offended, we do not have to forgive. We have many options for dealing with injustices. However, when we let a sense of injustice ferment and become unforgiveness, and that resentment builds up into the root of bitterness (Heb 12:15), then forgiveness is called for.



## **Forgiveness Does Not Depend on the Offender's Repentance**

Some people reason, I don't have to forgive if she isn't willing to be responsible and repent from her misdeeds. In support, they offer Luke 17:3 in support. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them." I think, however, that Jesus commends unilateral forgiveness and does not make it conditional on repentance of the offender. He says to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:2). He says to a woman, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48) Jesus acts unilaterally. Jesus knows that God knows our heart. God knows whether we truly repent or are going through the motions. We not only don't know our offender's heart, unfortunately, we don't even know our own at many times. So, Jesus made it simple. Forgive. Don't wait around. Luke argues that if a fellow believer (or anyone else) repents, we are to forgive. But, he simply does not mention the other side—if the person does not repent. Jesus' answer, also forgive.

Some parallel human forgiveness with divine forgiveness, but even divine forgiveness is unilateral. God—being out of time—forgives before we sin. Our repentance is a way we can appropriate that forgiveness and experience its blessings. In addition, if God made forgiveness contingent on our penitent behavior, that would undo grace and mercy and make divine forgiveness up to human action. Most Christian theologies do not think that is a legitimate Christian position.

Psychology tells us that, if our offender repents and we see evidence of it, that will lower the size of our injustice gap, making it easier to forgive. If the person does not appear repentant, that increases the size of our

injustice gap, making it harder to forgive. But we are still to forgive.

## **Forgiveness Is Not Conditional**

Other faiths often require actions on the part of the offender before forgiveness is granted. Maimonides, Jewish theologian, compiled older writings to describe Jewish requirements on forgiveness (Dorff, 1998). Of course, Jews could forgive at any time they want, and are encouraged to do so on Yom Kippur. But, under other circumstances, requirements had to be met before forgiveness was required. The offender had to apologize, demonstrate that he or she will not again act to hurt or offend, and ask for forgiveness. If those conditions are not met, then forgiveness is not mandatory for a Jew.

That leads to certain conclusions. One is that murder can be unforgivable because the one hurt is not available to receive the apology, see the responsible behavior, and receive the request for forgiveness and then grant forgiveness. These steps were digested from centuries of traditional writings by the rabbis. Most Christians do not hold that the offender's repentance is necessary to forgive or that only the one harmed must be the one to grant forgiveness.

## **Forgiveness Is Not Defined the Same by Everyone**

Even psychologists disagree to some degree in how precisely to define forgiveness. Whereas definitions will influence how you attempt to forgive, they are not usually worth fighting over. Small differences—such as whether forgiveness is a decision about behavior intentions, a change in motivation, a change in thoughts, or leads to a change in behavior—will orient people to change different things as they try to forgive. Still, most definitions are compatible.

Some ways of defining forgiveness might be potentially harmful. One is to include reconciliation within one's definition of forgiveness. If a battered woman is told that she must forgive, and if church members believe that forgiveness entails having to restore the relationship (that is, reconcile), this might put the woman in danger. In that case, the definition really matters.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is restoring trust in a relationship (Worthington, 2003). Reconciliation requires two people to be trustworthy. If one person is not trustworthy, but continues to hurt the other, reconciliation is unlikely. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is something individual.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Condoning What Was Done**

When we forgive, we do not condone the offender's hurtful act. Condoning is saying, what you did is okay. Forgiveness explicitly assumes that the offender's act was wrong; it was not okay. We forgive wrongdoing. This is important when we consider whether to tell a person who has not asked us for forgiveness that we forgive him or her. Forgiveness contains an implicit accusation that you did something wrong to me, but I (being magnanimous) forgive you. If the person we are treating as an offender does not believe that a wrong has been committed, this will feel like a false accusation.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Related to Societal Justice—At Least Not Like We Think**

Some people think that forgiveness is opposed to societal justice. That is, they think, *We can either pursue justice or we forgive and are duty-bound to drop the whole*

*thing*. This is what philosophers might call a category mistake. Societal justice is just that—societal. But forgiveness occurs inside an individual. When my mother was murdered in 1995, I could forgive the young man we thought did the murder. But due to a lack of evidence and a recanted confession, he was never brought to trial. If he had been tried, my forgiveness of him would not matter in the determination of his guilt or innocence. The justice system is societal. Forgiveness, individual.

### **What Forgiveness Is**

#### **Forgiveness Is Two Things—A Decision to Forgive and an Emotional Change**

While many similar definitions of forgiveness exist, I have found it most true-to-life and true to the Scriptural intent to make a distinction between two types of forgiveness. These are often related, but they are not two halves of forgiveness. Rather they are two distinct types.

One is *decisional forgiveness* (Davis et al., 2015). This is a decision about how you intend to act in the future towards a person who offended or hurt you. Decisional forgiveness is deciding not to get even with the person but to treat them as a valuable and valued person—one created in God's image. I believe that this is what Jesus is advocating in the Lord's prayer, when he directs his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." He then explains that verse. He says that God forgives believer's acts (2 Cor 5:10) to the extent we forgive those who have hurt or offended us (Matt 6:12, 14-5). We can decide to treat the person who hurt us as a valuable and valued person even if the person has offended us 70 x 7 times (or 77 times; or 100 million times; Matt 18:21-22). We cannot

necessarily control our emotions when people keep hurting and offending us or sometimes even when the person has inflicted a life-altering harm on us. So, God does not require emotional forgiveness from Christians, though God desires it (see the father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, Luke 15:11-32). But God does require decisional forgiveness. *Emotional forgiveness* is replacing negative unforgiving emotions like resentment, bitterness, anger, hate and the like with positive other-oriented emotions (Worthington, 2013). These are empathy, sympathy, compassion, or even love for the person. We are encouraged (but not commanded) to change our emotions toward offenders to the extent we can (see Eph 4:31-2; Col 3:13; Lev 19:18).

At first, we don't feel positive toward the offender. As emotional forgiveness begins, the positive emotions of (for example) empathy begin to neutralize the resentment, making me less resentful. Eventually I might feel no negativity towards my offender. For a stranger or someone I don't want to maintain a relationship with, neutrality is full emotional forgiveness. But with a valued relationship, like a spouse, child, or close friend who has hurt me, I usually want to keep pouring in the love, compassion, or empathy until the relationship feels positive again. Then we feel we have full emotional forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness Is a Choice**

No one has to forgive. No one can be forced to forgive. Of course, when unforgiveness is experienced, forgiveness is more incumbent on Christians. We see this from Jesus' teaching of the Lord's prayer to disciples. Even Christians might turn the matter over to God (Ps 55:22; 1 Pet 5:7), appeal

to God's divine justice (Ps 82:3; Ecc 3:17; Heb 10:30; Rom 12:19), or forbear (1 Cor 13:7; Eph 4:2; Col 3:13) to reduce the injustice gap. They can mix and match using each alternative to reduce the injustice gap until forgiveness is within grasp or is no longer needed.

### **Forgiveness Is a Virtue**

It is related to other virtues like humility, gratitude, agape love motivated altruism, compassion, and love. It is also related to conscientiousness, a sense of justice, patience, self-control. Typically, virtues can be worked on independently of other virtues, but classical virtue theory, like Aristotle's, was based on the idea that one's goal was to become an all around person of virtuous character, so working on forgiveness would be expected to lead also to working on other virtues until the person is a person whose character is wholly virtuous. Scientific studies have shown that a 7-hour workbook-based forgiveness intervention helped change people's trait of forgivingness, but it also changed people's patience and reduced their stable negative emotional moods. A 7-hour workbook-based humility intervention helped people be more humble by trait, but it also helped build their trait forgivingness, trait patience, and reduced the negativity of their moods. Recent research is showing what classical philosophers wrote—that being more virtuous in one area—if we take it seriously—can build other virtues into our characters (Lavelock et al., 2017).

### **Forgiveness Is a Virtue That Can Be Built by Traditional Christian Formation**

Virtue theory was initiated by Aristotle, largely taken over by Christianity (and most clearly articulated in Scripture in the book



of James), and practiced throughout the early church and into the pre-Renaissance period (especially advocated by Thomas Aquinas). With the rising popularity of Positive Psychology, starting about 1999, with its emphasis on character strengths and virtues, it has made a strong comeback in the last few years. Essentially virtue theory is the idea that ethics is not guided by consequentialist principles (that is, morality is not governed by whether it produces a good consequence) or by deontological principles (that is, that there are fundamental rational principles that all could and should agree upon) but rather morality is governed by a character of virtue. In Christian virtue theory, this is having the mind of Christ (Rom 12:1-2; Phil 2:5-8; 1 Cor 2:5-16; Col 3:2; 1 Pet 1:13). Developing the mind of Christ (or a life of true virtue) is done through a general process. First, one discerns the goal (for example, to be more Christ-like, to let Christ live more through me, to develop the fruit of the Spirit, or to develop a particular virtue like love, humility, forgiveness, generosity, gratitude, kindness). In glimpsing the goal, we don't understand the costs that will be incurred in obtaining it or the joys in developing it. Second, we begin to practice the virtue as we understand it, remaining open to God's correction if we stray off course, and we do so until it becomes a habit of the heart. Third, all along, we seek to meet the tests, trials, temptations, and deal with suffering, knowing that, as James 1:2-4 puts it, "Count it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." See also Rom 5:3-5.

### **Forgiveness is a Godly virtue.**

We can seek to develop into a more forgiving Christian, practice forgiveness often, seeking to forgive offenses and hurts from our past. We simultaneously meet the new offenses and hurts as tests of having the forgiving mind of Christ, and deal with them in a Godly way, turning things over to God, seeking loving and restorative justice, forbearing, to help lower the injustice gap, and forgiving. These are tests that build our character, strengthen our faith, increase our hope.

### **Forgiveness Is Beneficial by Promoting Positive Physical and Mental Health, Relationships, and Spirituality**

We know that forgiving others pleases God, and in itself—if for no other reason—that makes it worth doing and worth doing with excellence. But as it turns out, many scientific studies have sought to find exactly how forgiveness can lead to better life on earth—that is, better physical health, mental health and wellness, relationships, and spirituality.

### **Forgiveness is related to better physical health.**

In 2015, Toussaint, Worthington, and Williams edited a book of 17 chapters in which teams of scholars wrote about the relationship between forgiveness and physical health. Forgiveness helped people with chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, immune system dysregulation, fibromyalgia, alcohol dependence or addiction, drug dependence or addiction, irritable bowel syndrome, other gastrointestinal disorders, and other physical disorders. Often the way forgiveness works on the body is to reduce the stress of carrying around unforgiveness, which is stressful. Stress chronically elevates

the adrenaline (epinephrine (adrenaline) level and particularly the cortisol levels chronically. Elevated cortisol in the bloodstream, over time, can affect virtually every system in the body—the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, immune, digestive, and respiratory systems—and even affect the size of the brain, notably the hippocampus, which consolidates memories. Forgiveness also elevates oxytocin, a relationship attentive peptide, which makes us pay more attention to relationships.

However, forgiveness also elevates the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which turns on the freeze-flight-or-fight responses throughout our bodies. Not only does forgiveness calm those SNS responses, but it also activates parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) responses, the calming responses that turn off arousal. Forgiveness increases heart rate variability, which is another PSNS measure that indicates one is able to relax.

### **Forgiveness leads to better mental health.**

When we forgive, we reduce *ruminat*ion, which is rehearsing negative and obsessive self-talk. Forgiving brings some closure, reducing internal chatter. Rumination has been implicated in many mental health disorders including obsessive-compulsive disorders, anger disorders, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, PTSD, and some personality disorders. Anything that can ease rumination—which forgiveness does well—is a welcome solution to mental health disorders. In addition, forgiveness can lead to better well-being, which is related to more purpose and meaning in life. If we are less wrapped up in petty grudges,

we are more free to pursue a meaningful, purpose-filled, and happy life.

### **Forgiveness leads to better relationships.**

There are many reasons for this. People would rather be friends with people who are not bitter, resentful, and negative. People know that friends who are high in forgiveness have more tolerance for relationship faux pas, and won't be as quick to judge. Thus, forgiving people tend to have larger and more emotionally positive social support networks. Romantic partners tend to have more sense of interdependence and reciprocity if their partner is forgiving. When transgressions do occur, which are almost inevitable in long-term romantic relationships, people high in forgiveness can forgive and put the hurts behind them more. In families, especially those with adolescents, the three-way interactions with families in which there are adolescents yield many conflicts and hurt feelings on the part of parents and teens. Teens are often dealing with the same issues as their parents—career decisions, body changes, and relationship upsets. However, adolescents deal with the issues in a much different way than parents, keeping emotionally laden issues on the front burner.

### **Forgiveness leads to better spiritual health.**

If we want to be more Christlike, forgiveness is a prime character trait. We can develop more willingness to forgive by drawing on discernment of leading by the Holy Spirit, participating in the life of the church, listening to elders' wisdom, seeking and using the support of the other Christians we know, and seeking to practice what we have learned through books, articles, blog-posts, TED-talks, YouTube talks,

REACH Forgiveness psychoeducational groups, or DIY REACH Forgiveness workbook. (What's REACH Forgiveness? I'll talk about it in the section on interventions.)

### **Forgiveness Is Fast— Except When It Isn't**

Michael McCullough and his colleagues (2010) had college students who had been hurt or offended contact the researchers within 24 hours of the offense, then rate their unforgiveness for 19 straight days. They found that the data fit a “power curve,” which falls off quickly at first and then steadies out at about 10 percent remaining, slowly decaying over time. Within three days, about 85 percent of the transgressions had been forgiven. Wow, we might think, people are good forgivers. Not so fast. Remember, scientists report averages for a group of people. So, *on the average*, most hurts are no longer troublesome three days. But the genius of McCullough et al.'s study was they plotted what individuals did. Most went to total forgiveness very quickly—within a day or two. But quite a few were slower to forgive. Others didn't change over the 19 days. Some went on a slow burn and got gradually less forgiving as time went on. A few exploded into low-level rage after a day or two. It averaged out to look like fast forgiving, but this boils down to not being able to accurately predict what any individual might do after being hurt. So, how quickly should we expect to get over being hurt? Science would say that we should get over it fast—except when we don't: It matters a lot what the offender does and how we respond to that.

### **The Offender's Acts Can Help of Hurt Our Forgiveness, But Regardless, We Must Still Choose to Forgive**

If the offender is remorseful, apologizes, and makes amends, that makes forgiveness easier (Worthington, 2003). If the offender doesn't accept responsibility, blames us, is insincere, withholds an apology or does not offer to make up for harms caused—or if he or she seems to be eager to forgive the self and get on with life—that will retard forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by Thinking of Others, Not Ourselves**

Although forgiveness is highly beneficial to us, when we forgive, it actually has more effectiveness when we are able to forgive to bless the person who has offended or hurt us (Wade et al., 2005). We tested those motivations, and we found that forgiving to gain blessings for ourselves is a legitimate thing to do and it can jump-start forgiveness. However if we can then shift our mind to motivate ourselves to forgive because we are in a unique position to set the offender free from the chains of guilt and shame that he or she might be feeling, then more forgiveness and (ironically) more benefits accrue to us—even though we are seeking to bless someone else instead of ourselves. The facts are, once you know that forgiveness gives you physical health, mental health, relationship, and spiritual benefits—even in just reading about it as you did a couple of minutes ago—already will benefit you by helping you be more willing to forgive. In fact, we found the same benefits in pounding that lesson home in 8 hours of a group as in 6 hours, 5 hours, 4 hours, 2 hours, 1 hour, and (wait for it) ten minutes (Worthington, 2003). So, in our groups to

help others forgive, we make those points early on. After that, though, the amount of forgiveness you experience depends on how long you try seriously to forgive particular hurts, working through each until you've worked down the unforgiveness to a small amount.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by the Holy Spirit—Even with Non-Christians**

God's Holy Spirit is the worker behind the scenes to bring about forgiveness. However, the Holy Spirit works in the unseen world, though the effects are sometimes very visible in the seen world. Sometimes, we are the agent the Holy Spirit uses to bring about forgiveness. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is like an invisible helper—as when he works to promote forgiveness even in people who do not take Christ's name.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by Other Believers Who Encourage the Forgiver**

The great thing about forgiveness—and life in Christ in general—is that we are not expected to do this alone (Jones, 1995). God has provided a called-out community of Christians—those very theologically similar to us (like other Adventists) and those who are even quite theologically diverse and not like us at all. So, as has been the case since the ascension of Jesus, we have a body of helpers to walk with us in developing Christlikeness—and in our case forgiveness as an essential part of Christlikeness.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by Other Believers Who Practice Forgiveness and Mutually Support Others in the Community Who Are Seeking to Forgive**

One reason God has placed us in a church to help us forgive is not just because people support each others' attempts to

forgive. Also, we are in a community of others who are seeking to be more Christlike out of gratitude for what Christ has done on our behalf. That confluence of others doing what we, too, value with the presence everyday heroes of forgiveness in our midst, and also with stories, examples, and confessions of forgiveness from the faithful can keep us moving toward God when we, in our own weakness, might stumble.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by Community Norms and Beliefs**

It is not of trivial importance that in a Christian community, norms and community-endorsed beliefs and values guide our behavior. Norms are part of the sociology of any group, but that does not mean God isn't working through them.

### **Forgiveness Is Empowered by Preaching, Counseling, and Congregational Programs to Promote and Teach Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is also encouraged by things that happen within the congregation. What we might usually think of first is preaching. True, pastors can help us forgive by an excellent sermon. But other things help us forgive as well. These include pastoral and lay counseling. In addition, many other congregational activities help. These include Christian education classes, support groups, church-wide campaigns to promote forgiveness, and other congregation-wide attempts to help church-community members forgive.

## **How to Forgive**

### **Christian Forgiveness Thrived for Two Thousand Years Before Psychology**

## Entered the Scene—Do We Need the Psychology?

The scientific promotion of forgiveness is not meant to replace traditional Christian forgiveness. It is meant to supplement it—and sometimes it helps people who aren't Christians to connect more with a culture that values science. Some people don't want to use scientifically supported forgiveness interventions because they think, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Others think, "If it's not in Scripture, it can't be true." But still others think, "If it's not new, it's not any good." Or, "If science doesn't support it, we should not do it." I'm suggesting a middle road. Value what is traditionally done in the church, but be open to gaining better outcomes—for some (their choice of whether to use or not)—by adding scientifically supported methods.

### Traditional Christian Forgiveness

Scripture is clear that we need to forgive (Worthington, 2003) as we see when Jesus was teaching his disciples the Lord's prayer. But the purpose of the Bible is more about divine forgiveness than person-to-person forgiveness, so there is no specific teaching about *how* we should forgive other people. It's more like a Nike ad: just do it! So, traditionally Christian forgiveness has been promoted by ways that Christians have thought would be helpful. Over centuries of practice, these have indeed been found helpful. For example, the church promotes forgiveness through public confession (either spontaneous or read by a liturgist) in services. Mostly those confessions are sins against God, but some statements are made about person-to-person transgressions. Confessionals are used in some Christian traditions. Private reflection and bringing

one's transgressions before God in prayer are often used. Reading Scripture or devotional literature while reflecting also on one's daily interactions with others (often early morning or before bedtime) might prompt seeking forgiveness. Other ways of promoting forgiveness that have developed by tradition over the years. These include congregation members providing mutual support for each other as they struggle to forgive, pastoral sermons to motivate forgiveness, pastoral counseling to coach forgiveness, lay counseling to help people work with forgiveness difficulties, encouragement for families to teach forgiveness to children through positive examples and direct instructions, recognizing exemplars of forgiveness and holding them up for public scrutiny and example, recommending readings on forgiveness to help people learn forgiveness and reflect on it, writing songs and hymns about forgiveness, practicing spiritual disciplines regarding forgiveness, and having times of the church year that forgiveness becomes a focal point, like around Easter.

All of these motivate and support forgiveness. They help people forgive other people. Notice, however, that few deal at all about specifically *how* to forgive. Neither Scripture nor many of the traditional ways to promote forgiveness lay out a specific way (or choice among ways) for people to forgive. There are zero "Three steps to a more forgiving Christian life" in Scripture. Scripture acknowledges that God is the author of forgiveness and encourages people to turn to God for divine intervention. That is great and important advice. But God not only sovereignly intervenes to change people's hearts, God also intervenes by helping the church provide aid, the friends and



family of the forgiver provide support, and the forgiver to learn and practice the virtue of forgiveness in times that are easy and those that are difficult. There are many questions that are simply not addressed through Scripture and tradition. For instance, Are there steps that can make forgiving more likely to succeed—that is, to provide a wide avenue for God to work rather than a footpath through the jungle? How do couples forgive each other when transgressions have been perpetrated by both parties? How do we forgive someone, like a wayward child, for whom parents have sacrificed over a lifetime but who then enters into a campaign of hurt and disappointment toward the parents?

In addition, practical questions arise as to what the best ways to forgive are? Which ways encourage people to get closer to God? Which ways are scientifically shown to be quicker or produce more forgiveness, or produce more forgiveness per hour of effort? Furthermore, this is going to be a matter of individuals' values: Which is more important—the amount of additional closeness to God one experiences or the efficiency of the forgiveness experience?

### **Scientific Studies of Interventions to Promote Forgiveness**

Several forgiveness interventions have been developed and tested scientifically. The gold standard for scientific support is a randomized controlled trial (RCT). In this, a population is identified—like adult Christians—and a sample is taken from that population (e.g., college students at a Christian college, couples in which both partners affirm Christianity, or older adults who profess Christianity). People are randomly assigned to either a treatment condition

in which they receive some manual-specified standardized intervention or a control condition (such as a wait list, no treatment except assessment, or some alternative treatment). People in the conditions are then compared. Because people were randomly assigned to conditions, there is no rational reason to believe that a thousand potentially influential factors could be favoring outcomes in treatment or control condition because all participants had an equal chance of being in either condition. The only difference in the conditions is treatment versus either an alternative or none.

By 2014, 67 RCTs of forgiveness interventions had been done. Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, and Worthington did a meta-analysis comparing 53 of those interventions that met criteria for highest quality. They found three main conclusions. (1) Worthington's REACH Forgiveness model and Enright's process model (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015) were each used in about one-third of the studies, and all other treatments together constituted the other third. (2) All models—REACH, process, or other—were equally effective per hour if length of treatment was considered. (3) Regardless of treatment approach, more forgiveness was related also to increased hope and decreased depression and anxiety.

### **The Implications for Us for the Findings**

The implications of these findings—and other research done more recently—are important. First, it doesn't seem to matter what program one might use to promote forgiveness, but the important point is the *amount of time that people try seriously to forgive*. Let me emphasize that. It's mostly about time trying to forgive. Second, since 2013, we have found that when people do

use less direct ways of promoting forgiveness—like hearing a sermon on forgiveness, reading a forgiveness book, attending a course on forgiveness, or reading an article like this one about forgiveness, it helps a little. But, importantly, how much it helps is still all about time. In these indirect cases, people are not directly trying to forgive. They kind of hit-or-miss apply what the pastor is saying or the writer is writing or the teacher is teaching to their direct application to trying to forgive. Thus, those things produce from one-half to one-third the effect of directly trying to forgive (Worthington et al., 2020).

Reading a book on forgiveness, which takes about 15 hours, that asks the reader to apply the lessons taught by the writer produces an effect size of about half of what working through a DIY workbook to promote forgiveness would produce (Greer et al., 2014). Sitting in a 12-hour course teaching about forgiveness has about the same effect as reading a book (Worthington et al., 2020). We even ran a two-week forgiveness blitz on many Christian college campuses (Griffin et al., 2019), hoping to raise awareness of forgiveness and inspire students to try to forgive more often. The colleges organized guest chapel speakers, debates, book discussions, essay contests, recommended readings, forgiveness groups, and many other ways to bring forgiveness before the students. The average student reported 2.5 hours of exposure. The average effect size was just a little less than completing a 2-hour workbook on forgiveness. But that effect was an average among over 600 students! And because of individual differences, some people were strongly affected.

### **How Can a Pastor Increase the Effectiveness of Sermons about Forgiveness?**

What can a pastor do to increase the effect size of the 30-minute sermon? They typical sermon might affect a couple of people fairly strongly, but the effect averaged across the congregation is about the same as reading this article. Sermons don't spend much time getting people to apply the sermon to their lives, and it is all about how much time they spent applying it. But we have found that a pastor can do two things to dramatically increase the impact of the sermon. First, if the pastor spends 5 to 10 minutes talking about the physical health effects of unforgiveness, psychological benefits of forgiving, benefits to people's relationships of forgiveness, and the spiritual benefits of forgiving, then that earns an effect size across the congregation about like the entire congregation completing DIY 2-hour workbooks. Second—and perhaps even more important—the pastor can recommend that people engage in activities that ask them to try to forgive specific people in their lives—past or present. That could be trying to forgive on their own initiative (which is fine if they can stick to it), but it is usually more effective if people are directed to a specific DIY applied book on forgiveness (e.g., Worthington, 2003), psychoeducational group (Lampton et al., 2005; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020; Stratton et al., 2008; Toussaint et al., 2020), or DIY workbook (Greer et al., 2014) on forgiveness, like the REACH Forgiveness model (see [www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com](http://www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com)), which as you'll recall is about three times as powerful per hour of time as reading a book or listening to YouTube talks.

## **REACH Forgiveness of the Other Person**

REACH Forgiveness is a program I have developed to help people who want to forgive do so. It leads them through a series of exercises, and it can be done equally effectively in a group or by completing a free downloadable workbook, which takes the person through similar exercises on their own. REACH is an acronym.

**R=Recall the hurt.** To heal, you must face the fact that you've been hurt. Make up your mind not to be snarky (i.e., nasty and hurtful), not to treat yourself like a victim, and not to treat your partner as a jerk. Decide to forgive. Decide that you are not going to pursue pay-back but you will treat the person as a valuable person.

**E=Empathize** with your partner. Empathy is putting yourself in the other person's chair. Pretend that the person who hurt you is in an empty chair across from you. Talk to him or her. Pour your heart out. Then, when you've had your say, sit in his or her chair. Talk back to the imaginary person so you can see why the person might have wronged you. This builds empathy, and even if you can't empathize, you might feel more sympathy, compassion, or love, which help you heal from hurt. This allows you to give...

**A=Altruistic gift.** Give forgiveness as an unselfish, altruistic gift. We all can remember when we wronged someone—maybe a parent, teacher or friend—and the person forgave us. We felt light and free. And we didn't want to disappoint that person by doing wrong again. By forgiving unselfishly, you can give that same gift to someone who hurt you.

**C=Commit.** Once you've forgiven, write a note to yourself—something

as simple as "Today, I forgave [person's name] for hurting me." This helps your forgiveness last.

**H=Hold onto forgiveness.** We write notes of commitment because we will almost surely be tempted to doubt that we really forgave. We can re-read our notes. We did forgive.

The REACH Forgiveness program has been tested in over 30 published randomized controlled trials (for a review, see Worthington, 2020), with others underway in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ukraine, Colombia, South Africa, Ghana, Spain, and elsewhere in the United States. I've been involved to some degree in about half of those published studies, but the remainder were done by other clinical scientists—some of whom were aimed at trying to show that their own treatment might even be better than the REACH Forgiveness method. Yet, time after time, REACH Forgiveness worked. There is a Christian-oriented version and a secular version. Amazingly, explicitly Christian and secular versions work about equally well for Christians. With the secular model, Christians still do the things we know to be important—pray for the person who hurt us, search Scripture and listen to the Holy Spirit, pastors, and fellow Christians for support and guidance.

I said earlier that God creates forgiveness within people. REACH Forgiveness is like the wooden forms used to shape a concrete pillar (i.e., the permanent shape of forgiveness within us). The concrete—God-created forgiveness—that makes up the real pillar is the real action. But the forms do shape the pillar and they can be used time and again on different forgiveness events. The boards making up the forms are more than merely the five steps of REACH. The full program



involves (1) a Scriptural grounding of forgiveness, (2) defining forgiveness clearly, (3) seeing the benefits of forgiving, (4) making a commitment to seek a decision and emotional change that make up forgiving, (5) working through each step of REACH, (6) making a decision to forgive, and (7) finally broadening the application by seeking to apply the REACH model to other events that might not yet be fully forgiven so that one becomes a more forgiving Christian, not just more forgiving of one transgression. Forming forgiveness is God's work, and these elements of the REACH method can complement other Christian efforts to forgive that have been used through the ages—prayer for the offender, examen (systematically looking at my own life with the intent of identifying and changing things that might have been my contribution to the hurt), searching Scripture, discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit. Each of these can work together as some of the forms that God uses to build forgiveness into our lives.

### **Ten Recommendations**

If I had to glean ten practical suggestions from this article, here are the ones I'd choose.

- If you feel resentment for longer than a day, don't wait for it to go away. Immediately use the REACH Forgiveness workbook to knock unforgiveness out quickly—like taking a dose of penicillin to knock out an infection.
- Remember this principle: The amount of forgiveness is proportional to the amount of time trying to forgive specific harms either in your past or in the present. Spend time.

- Get an accountability partner.
- Get the entire congregation involved in becoming a more-forgiving congregation.
- Forgiveness is about being closer to God, being more Christlike. It's not about being a spiritual giant.
- Don't say, "I forgive you" if the person hasn't asked for forgiveness.
- Don't wait for the other person to apologize or repent before you forgive.
- Forgive people in identity groups that might have harmed you or others in your group.
- Don't confuse forgiveness with reconciliation, condoning what was done, getting justice, or observing justice. There are many ways to lower the size of the injustice gap. Use as many as needed.
- Remind yourself that holding grudges damages your physical, mental, relational, and spiritual health. There are many benefits to forgiving. Knowing that helps you want to forgive. But the most benefits will occur if you forgive because (1) you want to get peace and get closer to God and (2) you want to bless the person who injured you.

### **Conclusion**

I hope you've found this article as practical as I hoped it would be. I hope you come away with a better understanding of what forgiveness isn't and what it is. I also hope that you are strengthened in the knowledge that we have a long tradition of hundreds of years promoting forgiveness in the church through the methods that have evolved as humans have tried to live

in accordance with God's word in God's community. Yet, I hope you emerge from reading this article also with the knowledge that modern science can add other wrinkles that can help you forgive better, and perhaps you have other ideas you can try to forgive any hurt or offense someone has done in your life that still might have a lingering hold on you.

### Thought Questions

1. If there are indeed two distinct types of forgiveness—a decision about how one intends to act toward the offender and an emotional replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions—how might each affect the benefits of forgiving in terms of physical health, mental health, relationship, and spirituality?
2. If becoming a more forgiving Christian is proportional to the time spent trying to forgive particular hurts, how can we make time to become more forgiving in our busy world?
3. You might think that forgiveness is something that arises only once in a great while. But Worthington believes that we are faced with offenses and hurts every day. We can't afford the time to whip out a seven-hour DIY forgiveness workbook every time we get offended. What strategy can you form now to allow you to deal with the many hurts you experience daily and keep them from turning into big hurts? Worthington suggested adopting a ground-rule that, "If you are still thinking about it on day two, try to forgive it." That is only one part of a strategy. Perhaps discussion with others might help you formulate a more complete strategy.
4. In REACH Forgiveness, the centerpiece of emotional forgiveness is replacing unforgiving emotions with empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love. How can you empathize with someone who has callously hurt you or continues to hurt you?
5. What should you do if you are stuck in a relationship with someone who often hurts you and you can neither get out of the relationship nor avoid the person?
6. Let's reverse things. Suppose you are the offender. Perhaps you don't even think you've done anything all that bad. Yet the other person is deeply hurt. What should you do to narrow the person's injustice gap, making forgiveness more possible?

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## FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

*In December of 2003, while serving as missionaries on the Pacific Island of Palau, Melissa DePaiva's family was murdered in their home. Miraculously, she survived. As she grew up, she reflected on what forgiveness is and what it means to forgive. Using the events of her life paired with biblical insights, she writes on the necessity and possibility of forgiveness and why she chose to forgive the man who killed her family. While forgiveness is necessary and possible, even in the worst situations, it does not always look the same and is often the result of a lifelong process. The Bible offers much insight into a lifestyle of forgiveness and it is by these principles that Christians are to treat others. Christ showed us the ministry of reconciliation through His death on the cross and calls us to follow in the same path. Forgiveness is not as much a difficult concept as it is a difficult journey.*

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

When talking about Christ's death on the cross, Paul speaks of the message of the cross being "foolishness to all those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God" (New Living Translation, 2006, 1 Corinthians 1:18). God's kingdom is seemingly up-side-down. Weakness becomes strength, foolishness is wisdom, the way up is down and the last becomes first. And the things that we would consider to be wise and gain are considered by God as foolish and vain. "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty (New Living Translation, 2006, 1 Corinthians 1:27).

In my life I have come to learn that one of those mysterious, up-side-down ways of God's Kingdom is forgiveness. To someone looking in from the outside of an offense, forgiveness in many ways means absolutely nothing and can be seen as weakness on

the part of the one forgiving. But when an offense is made and consequences begin to unfold, then, "the one who is perishing", the one who needs forgiveness, does not regard it as weakness but as a life-line of strength.

The statement rings true: we are all sinners in need of forgiveness (New Living Translation, 2006, Romans 3:23; 6:23). The forgiveness of God is one of the most powerful forces in the universe, mending broken souls to be able to live as new creations. From my view, this forgiveness, that only comes from above, is strength and wisdom. The one who sees forgiveness as a weakness has not yet experienced its need and has, quite frankly, not come to the realization that they are in need of forgiveness from its ultimate Source.

One of the biggest challenges we face in this life is what to do when people wrong us. The world looks out for self and seeks to self-preserve at all cost. In turn, many people hold grudges and perpetuate hurtful thoughts and actions to those who have

wronged them. According to research in Faith and Christianity by the Barna Group (2019), about 23 percent of practicing Christians admit to the existence of one person they “just can’t forgive”. In this article, I’ll share my experience and seek to answer the following questions: Is forgiveness always necessary? Is forgiveness always possible? Why should I forgive?

### **The Story**

I was ten years old when I lived with my parents and my older brother on the small island of Palau. My father, Ruimar, had been called as the missionary pastor. My mother, Margareth, was a teacher at the church school. My brother, Larisson, who was just a year older than me, always had some sort of adventure he was working towards. We loved living in what we often thought was paradise. The church family and other friends were loving and embracing. The people were so giving of themselves and of their time. We often felt as if we were back in our home country of Brazil, in such a warm familial environment.

Our mission work was going so well, but then one night in December of 2003, everything changed. Our house was secluded on the academy campus. We could not see the other houses just down the road from us because of the curve in the road. To the back, we had a deep jungle reaching all the way to the distant ocean down the hillside. Just three short days before Christmas, a man broke into our house at night to allegedly steal some of the technology equipment my father used for home and church. My parents both woke up with the commotion, faced the intruder, and it did not take long before I found myself in paralytic fear at the sounds and sights of the man taking

the life of my parents and my brother. Then he kidnapped me and took me someplace unknown to me.

To this day, I am in awe of how God carried me in His arms of safety and preserved my life. After what seemed like days, the man left me for dead on the side of a road in the middle of the night. I was later found that night when I was able to flag down a vehicle and was taken to safety. Upon reaching familiar faces, news of what happened spread around the island and literally around the world to my grandparents who were in the middle of relocating from their mission service in Mexico to Sudan, Africa. My grandmother, in shock, booked the next flight to Palau.

The next few days and weeks were a whirlwind for me and for my family. But one thing was for sure—God kept His hand close and His feet ahead of ours. When my grandmother arrived in Palau, she was relieved to see that I was okay. However, she had one thing in mind, to see the face of the man who had taken the life of her first-born son, daughter-in-law, and only grandson. She went to the jail not knowing what would take place. She spoke with the previously faceless man and somehow the words of forgiveness came out. Calling him by name, she told Justin that he was forgiven. In talking to my grandmother several years later, she explains the words that flowed out of her mouth that day did not come from a rehearsed speech or her deepest feelings towards him. She would tell you today, those words came from the Holy Spirit using her as a divine channel of His mercy.

I grew up in the home of my grandparents for the next several years. Many times at night before going to sleep, or even in the middle of the night when I could not



sleep, I would talk to my grandmother. She tells me that I asked her many hard questions for my age. “Grandma, will that man be in heaven someday?”, I asked. It was during these sleepless nights that I learned the reality of the greater cosmic conflict that happens before our eyes every day of our lives, to which we are constantly blind. All I knew was Satan had used a man, a child of God, to take the lives of another of God’s children. For what purpose? I do not know.

In a sermon I heard by Ty Gibson (2016), director and speaker of Light Bearers and pastor of the Storyline Adventist Church in Eugene, Oregon, he tells the story of a man who receives a knock at his door. He opens it to find two police officers standing outside. “We have some bad news,” they say. “We regret to inform you that your son has been murdered.” In shock, not fully able to come to grips with what has just been said, he braces himself against the door frame. “My son. Murdered. What did he do to deserve this? He was such a good son. Something must be done to the murderer. This isn’t fair. Justice must be served.”

As the man tries to collect himself. The officers continue, “Sir, we’re afraid there’s more. We’ve apprehended the murderer and found out that she is your daughter.” Overcome with grief, the man fumbles for words that seem elusive. “How could this have happened? Why my children?”

The father is at an impasse. Knowing his son has been killed he wants justice yet, as he’s come to find out, his daughter is the murderer, and he wants mercy. Forgiveness is difficult because our innate need for justice interferes with our desire to forgive. This battle that began in heaven and continues to this day has an ultimate goal: Satan attempts to prove that God is unjust

and unloving; God desires to prove His love for us and reveal Satan as a deceiver.

Is forgiveness always necessary?

The Bible is full of examples of God’s people extending forgiveness towards others. The theme of forgiveness runs throughout the Bible. When Joseph recognized his brothers in Egypt, he did not harbor anger towards them, but instead extended forgiveness in the form of care and compassion. He said, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don’t be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children” (New Living Translation, 2006, Genesis 50:20–21). In the face of those who would kill him with stones, Stephan uttered the words “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (New Living Translation, 2006, Acts 7:60). Jesus himself, as he hung dying on the cross expressed forgiveness to his executioners, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (New Living Translation, 2006, Luke 23:34). These are extreme cases of forgiveness, but is forgiveness always necessary?

In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter comes to Jesus with a question. “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me?” (New Living Translation, 2006, Matthew 18:21). Peter offers the number seven as how many times he should forgive, trying to be very generous and go the extra mile. I imagine Jesus shaking his head with a little smile as he replied, “No, not seven times...but seventy times seven” (New Living Translation, 2006, Matthew 18:22). Jesus isn’t trying to give a specific number of times we are supposed to forgive someone. He hyperbolizes the amount implying that our forgiveness to others should

overflow generously and it is indeed, always necessary.

I remember my grandmother telling me that the anger, malice, and resentment towards others we carry with us weighs on our lives. The Bible makes it clear: forgiveness is always necessary but the consequences for the offense are not always absolved when forgiven.

### **Is forgiveness always possible?**

Forgiveness is not something that transpires overnight, and it is not a time-stamped decision for most. Though there are many stories where this portrait of forgiveness is painted, this was not the case for me. I believe it is not the case for many other people either.

In Matthew 6, Jesus makes clear what is expected of us in regard to forgiveness. Modeling for his disciples how to pray, he includes these words directed towards God, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (New Living Translation, 2006, Matthew 6:13). We must pause for a moment and ponder the significance of this appeal. First, Jesus clarifies that the forgiveness of our own debts, or sins, comes directly from God. We must appeal to God in repentance and contrition asking God for forgiveness of our own sins. Secondly, Jesus connects forgiveness of others with the forgiveness of our own sins. In the same way that we appeal to God for forgiveness of our sins, we are to forgive others. There is a distinction here. We cannot forgive, excuse, or pardon someone’s evil actions. What we can do is offer our forgiveness to the person that has wronged us.

This frees us from the burden of carrying the other person’s sin. No longer do we drink the poison of resentment and anger.

From a young age, I learned that forgiveness is divine. There was not a big “Aha!” moment for me when I had decided to forgive Justin. It was a process that grew over time. As I grew up, learning more about the heart of God through the Bible, my family, and spiritual mentors, I came to realize I had forgiven Justin. He took so much away from me but God has been faithful in giving back to me in incredible ways.

Let me be clear. Forgiveness does not make a wrong right. Just because forgiveness is extended to someone, it does not mean that they are absolved of the consequences of the offense. Forgiveness does not always mean that relationships are restored. Forgiveness is a process of divine outpouring. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is necessary for my well-being. Forgiveness means I am no longer bound to the negative feelings I have toward the offender.

The question then becomes: even though forgiveness is necessary and possible, why should I forgive?

### **Why should I forgive?**

I believe when there is a very important decision to make you must look at the situation from different angles. One angle of forgiveness may be often overlooked. If you were to look at forgiveness through the lens of a cosmic conflict you would see a much different picture of what forgiveness really means. Think back to the illustration by Ty Gibson (2016) above.

Revelation 12:7 (New Living Translation, 2006) describes a war in heaven between Michael and the dragon. Throughout Scripture, we see echoes of the great controversy, the cosmic conflict between God and Satan. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 4:9 (The Amplified Bible, 1987) says that we are a



spectacle, a “show in the world’s amphitheater” for everyone to see. Each day that passes is an acting out of this great conflict. It is within this great conflict that Jesus came to die for our sins and extend divine forgiveness to us.

There is a parable in Matthew 18:23-35 (New Living Translation, 2006) about a servant who is unforgiving. This servant owed an unpayable debt to his master. His master was ready to throw him out and sell him, his wife, and his kids in order to pay the debt. The servant fell to his face and begged forgiveness from the master. The master felt pity for him and forgave him of his debt. Yet, when this servant left his master, he went and found a fellow servant who owed him a small debt. He choked him and threw him in prison until he could pay the debt. The master, finding out about the actions of the servant whom he had forgiven much, threw the unforgiving servant in prison until his unpayable debt could be paid.

In this story, I see myself. I have an unpayable debt with God. The only one who can forgive me of my sin is God. There is no amount of work I can do to pay back my debt of sin. Yet God in His infinite love and mercy extends pardon and forgiveness to me. Seeing how much I have been forgiven, how then can I not forgive Justin?

In the light of the great controversy, I saw that I was not forgiving a man that did something in his right mind. Of course, many things lead up to a person losing control of their actions and their right mind, but I understood that a force greater than him was at work that night. Angels and demons fought for each one of our lives—mine, my parents’, my brother’s, and his. I don’t know where Justin stands today in his walk with Christ. Quite frankly, it is not for me to

know or wonder. What I should do is daily forgive. In all reality, an offense of this sort is not a once done, once forgiven. Sometimes it takes forgiveness again and again offered in a form of a prayer from the heart to God. With time, there begins to grow a change of heart attitude and maturity of thought that makes it easier to live without going back to negative thoughts—a chapter that has come and gone leaving only a new me. Though sometimes forgiveness brings healing to the repentant offender, forgiveness is more about the one who extends it than the offender.

### **The Return**

Through the years, my grandfather kept in contact with the pastor serving in Palau and occasionally sent word to Justin in the jail. I remember receiving news of Justin’s baptism in 2016. Attached in an email was a picture of him in the baptismal tank. I did not know what to feel. I had not seen a picture of him for several years before that. This was a new person. Eventually I realized that I felt gratitude for how things had turned. And for the first time, I saw proof of how God’s plan is bigger than our understanding or our circumstances.

It was 15 years after leaving Palau when I was presented the opportunity to go back for the first time since leaving that place I had grown to love so much, saying “I’ll be back someday”. Dr. Ann Hamel, PhD, DMin, psychologist for the General Conference International Service Employees Support Team, who had been sent to Palau from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to be with our family in 2003, approached us with the idea of going back to Palau. The arrangements were made for the return to Palau, only this time

I would go back with my husband Michael and my grandparents. We made the trip to a place that would bring back many of my memories accompanied by Dr. Hamel and her husband, Dr. Loren Hamel, MD, a longtime family physician to my grandparents and president of Spectrum Health Lakeland in Saint Joseph, Michigan.

God was working in my life, through the slow process of forgiveness, to engrave the precious memories I had of Palau without the traumatic and overwhelming burden of remembering someone who was many times considered the subject of my tragic experience. Yes, I remember what happened, but the memories are no longer haunting or overcasting. While many people back home sought to warn us to be ready for psychological flashbacks and fear, we felt the Holy Spirit had already shown us the way and was holding us by the hand. I felt excitement in being back in Palau with the people I remembered and the places I recognized. We were treated like old friends who had come home. There was laughter and there were stories shared. We had the opportunity to see the most beautiful places as well as old familiar places such as the home we lived in. We also spent time with the church family in nightly meetings at the Koror Seventh-day Adventist church where Michael was able to speak.

At one point, I was asked if I planned to visit the jail. The thought had gone through my head before leaving for Palau, but I did not know what it would be like to see the man who had taken the life of my family. In a similar way, I did not know if he would want to see me. However, with the question asked of me I knew it was something I had to do. If God had called us to Palau, He

was also expecting to show us more than we could imagine.

The arrangements were made to visit the jail at the end of our trip as we did not want to cause any commotion during our time there. Accompanied by several family friends and local church leaders we found ourselves in the visitation room in the jail where Justin waited. Our plan was to pray with Justin and affirm his decision to follow the Lord two years before. Surprisingly, Justin had some words to share with us. He spoke of the remorse, the lingering memory of what he had done, and the ways he planned to carry on the legacy of my parents and brother in jail. When he was finished, my grandparents also shared some words of encouragement with him. Then it came my turn and immediately I felt the Holy Spirit leading my words saying through the tears, "We are no better than you are. We all need God's saving grace. I want to see you in heaven one day with my parents and my brother" (Hamel, 2019). Michael then walked over to Justin's side. Putting a hand on his shoulder, we prayed.

I can truly say I have never experienced the Holy Spirit so close and so real in my life before. For the first time, I was able to formally extend forgiveness to Justin. Before, I had forgiven him in my heart. A forgiveness between me and God. But there, at the jail reconciliation happened.

The thought might be, "How do you call that reconciliation?" There was no word of friendship; there were no handshakes. Just the Holy Spirit working to bring closure to a part of the story that somehow was coming together yet still being written. Reconciliation does not mean relationships are always restored. Quite frankly, when certain kinds of boundaries are crossed,

reconciliation cannot happen. For example, a person who has been abused should not be expected to reconcile as life used to be. Maybe the parties involved agree to not be in the same place without company. New boundaries are set so chances are eliminated of finding oneself in the same situation again. Forgiveness does not mean complacency. The consequences of our actions are not always absolved once forgiveness is extended and we should act carefully to balance the need for restoration of bridges that have been burned. God will let us know if it is necessary and to what degree.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes about “the ministry of reconciliation,” saying, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (New Living Translation, 2006, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20). I choose to forgive because God chose to forgive me. He, not counting my trespasses against me, has entrusted the message of reconciliation to me to further extend to others. By forgiving, we become ambassadors for Christ, representing His way of living and forgiving to the people around us. Reconciliation, then, simply means though trespasses have been committed, they are not counted

against someone. Though the consequences of wrong action remain, forgiveness is still necessary and possible.

Maybe forgiveness is not as much a difficult concept as it is a difficult journey. Even then, God set the ultimate example of forgiving a people He created long ago knowing they would one day walk away from Him.

I have shared the story of forgiving a person whom I did not know well yet had created such an enormous debt in my life. However, it is often harder to forgive that person you know well and has hurt you so much. Even here, Christ still offers his comfort and Holy Spirit to plant the seed of forgiveness which then can blossom into reconciliation. Though every story has its variations, God understands and has already prepared a way if we so choose to take it.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between God’s forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of other people?
2. How can we learn to set aside our innate need for justice in favor of our desire to forgive?
3. What is holding me back from forgiving someone who has wronged me?

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# FORGIVENESS IS THE ANTIDOTE TO RACIAL RESENTMENT

*Nelson Mandela once said, “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.” Resentment affects our brain, mental health, and physical health, yet we still hold on to it. Forgiving someone that wrongs us is liberating and very personal. It is intentional and mindful behavior. Before we embark on forgiving, it’s best to differentiate what forgiveness is and what it is not. The misguided definition of forgive-and-forget can become barriers to the benefits of forgiveness. God provides a Biblical framework for gaining the healing benefits of forgiveness. Science says your health benefits from forgiving, and God says your soul does too.*

Forgiveness is a reluctantly learned skill. To heal, many of my clients must learn to forgive. Forgiveness rewires the brain (Ricciardi et al., 2013). It moves us out of a survival mode to a mindful functioning mode in the cortex’s executive functioning area.

Mindful people use their whole brain to see the big picture, solve problems, function better, clear thinking, and are intentional. I believe it was God’s intent for humans to use the executive center of their brain as we the only creature that he created with that ability and type of brain. Resentment induces a brain regression that uses the brain’s low-level survival center.

The health benefits of forgiveness are evident, yet many are reluctant to forgive. I want to change that. The field of forgiveness and its research is vast (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Forgiving is very personal. Why do we hold onto resentment? What benefit does it bring us?

## **About the Author**

I grew up in a black American religious home with two parents. My parents had very little formal education. Recently, I discovered a new phenomenon, the older I get, the smarter they become. This commentary reflects my bias, my background, my education, my experiences, and my journey. I speak from this lens. This review is not a rave against or for the politics of today. As a good mental health counselor, I know I can only take clients as far as I have gone. The rest is up to my clients. My goal for writing this article is to encourage the reader to go further than I have.

My Christian walk, background, and education have uniquely shaped me. It has set me apart to help others. I’m a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a Doctor of Ministry in Family Therapy and a Master of Divinity in Marriage and Family Therapy. I retired from the US Army after 20 years enlisted as a mental health medic. I deployed to Afghanistan and worked in the military’s maximum-security prison at Fort

Leavenworth, KS. I now serve as an Employee Assistance Counselor for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Historically, black Americans are reluctant to seek formal mental health treatment. Many of us grew up in homes with a deep distrust of the medical system. Some of us have been marginalized or feel discounted within the medical system. Upon a closer look, I have come to appreciate the non-traditional counselors, some of whom have gone unnoticed, such as the town barber, the home hairstylist, the preacher, mommas, poppas, and grandparents. In our communities, they have been doling out street wisdom and sage advice for years. These non-traditional counselors may lack formal education, but they thrive because they do not face the negative stigma that seeking mental health has today.

According to Smith (2019), “the historical importance of the black church as a center—not only for education, political organizing, and basic sustenance but for preserving the black spirit amid unthinkable suffering that continues into the present. Reducing these acts of forgiveness to mere expressions of superhuman empathy or one-dimensional attempts to curry favor amongst whites obscures these events’ complexity. The difficult decisions that black people must make it daily as we negotiate our own needs and those of our communities.”

### **The Work I Do**

Over my 30 years of serving others, I have discovered some exciting observations. We need others to heal, grow, and stand firm. Solomon said it best in Ecclesiastes 4:12, “And if one prevails against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord

is not quickly broken.” When we connect with others, we gain strength as we share each other’s burdens. The second observation I notice is the clients I see in my office are often the most functional member of their family. Therefore, I work hard to keep them afloat as I know they become the greatest spokespersons to elevate their family functioning.

Two primary clients come to see me; one wants to feel better and vent. The other wants to be better. Being better sometimes hurts as you must be willing to face some horrible things from your past, your family, or yourself. I hear the most gut-wrenching stories while counseling others. I do not enjoy hearing disgusting material, but I will gladly do it and walk with my clients if that means they will get better. I love helping people gain a new perspective and gain the courage they need to grow and change. Good counseling is a brain-changing experience. It helps people rewire their brains and to get unstuck. It is a real pleasure to work with the best of people as they stand up to seek help.

Negative wellness is a stigma not confined to the African American community. The stigma shows up everywhere, the military, law-enforcement, blue-collar workers, professionals, lawyers, politicians, and even physicians. No one is immune. The stigma of seeking help is shrouded by shame and weakness. Our American culture encourages us to fake being strong and to stand alone.

### **Resentment and Its Role**

In 2020, George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis, Minnesota, sparked months of protests, civil unrest, and riots. The video of Mr. Floyd’s death went viral. While there had been other deaths of black citizens by

police, George's death marked a turning point because the whole world was quarantined and forced to confront its policing system. For many, the protest was an outward expression of hopelessness against a racial profiling system and an adversarial system stacked against black citizens. For others, George reminded them of their own past mistreatment and resentments. Sadly, a few took it as an opportunity to get even.

Resentment is a powerful tool and sometimes a motivator for revenge. Resentment is our futile effort to punish and get back at the offender. However, it rarely works. Meanwhile, the offender is free to move on with their life, never realizing the power we surrendered over to them by hating, blaming, and resenting them. Resentment infects the soul like a virus. It moves through the self like a metastasized cancer and tethers us to the past like an anchor. According to Mark 11:26<sup>1</sup>, Jesus tells us there is a heavy price to pay if we refuse to forgive others. He tells us the heavenly Father will not forgive us if we fail to forgive others.

Resentment plays a role. It becomes a part of our identity. Who do we become once we forgive our antagonists? To forgive means, I must confront myself and my identity. That's a scary thought if my identity is rooted in victimhood. To forgive also means giving up the victim role.

Resentment is reactionary. Reactions come from the brain stem, a place of survival. Resentment comes to us naturally; however, forgiveness does not. We react from the brain stem when we are in the fight, flight, or freeze mode. It's a brain regression. We are operating from our primitive brain.

Sadly, many people are chronically regressed and don't even realize it. (Schnarch, 2018)

Resentment blocks us from healing cognitively and emotionally. According to Dr. Schnarch (2018), he warns his readers not to be too quick to forgive, lest we run the risk of going blind to our antagonist and risk further mental damage. When we forgive, we need to be clear about what we are forgiving. As humans, we will have fleeting memories and sometimes lingering hurts and reminders. In Luke 11:3-4<sup>2</sup>, Jesus provides additional context. He says, "if your brother repents, forgive him." I love reading the word "if" as it is very powerful and provides a stipulation for us to forgive with our eyes wide open rather than granting blind clemency.

Are you a forgiving person?

Sadly, some people are not very forgiving. For whatever reason or circumstance, some situations make it challenging to allow ourselves to move forward, grow, mature, and use our whole brain to forgive. I believe self-awareness is the beginning of learning.

Judy Belmont provides a short Forgiveness IQ quiz to help users determine if they need help learning to forgive. With permission, I've included it here for easy access. The quiz is not scientifically peer-reviewed. It is merely a self-administered snapshot for the benefit of the participant.

### **Forgiveness IQ<sup>3</sup>**

**By Judy Belmont**

For the following ten questions, rate each item from 1 to 10 to determine your "Forgiveness IQ." Rate your responses on a continuum from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree).

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1. MySword Bible app, World English Bible version.

2. MySword Bible app, World English Bible version.

3. Inserted with permission from the author.



1. \_\_\_ I will not forgive someone if they are not sorry and do not admit what they have done.
2. \_\_\_ Those who have wronged or slighted me but take no responsibility for hurting me do not deserve to be forgiven.
3. \_\_\_ I find that my lack of ability to forgive makes me stuck thinking about what happened in the past.
4. \_\_\_ I cannot forgive because I do not want to condone bad behavior.
5. \_\_\_ The difficulty of forgiving makes it hard for me to trust others.
6. \_\_\_ It is hard to forgive because forgiving is letting someone off the hook and makes them no longer accountable.
7. \_\_\_ Forgiveness is something that you just feel; it is not a trainable skill.
8. \_\_\_ Since there is nothing I can do about things now, I tend to keep things in and do not share my hurt with others.
9. \_\_\_ If I forgive, that means I will be vulnerable again, so I need to protect myself.
10. \_\_\_ I cannot forgive myself for past mistakes, choices, and failures.

Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you do? The lower the score, the better is your Forgiveness IQ.

The following is a rough guideline on what your score means:

15 or Lower—**You are a Forgiveness**

**Genius:** Congratulations!

16–29—**Strong Forgiveness Compe-**

**tency:** You have given yourself the gift of forgiveness, and you usually stay positive.

30–49—**Moderate Forgiveness Com-**  
**petency:** You have some work to be-  
come less negative and stuck in past  
resentments.

50–69—**Moderate Forgiveness Im-**  
**paired:** A difficulty with forgiveness has  
limited your ability to stay positive and  
live fully in the present

70–84—**Severely Forgiveness Impaired:**  
Consider seeking professional help to  
give yourself the gift of forgiveness.

85–100—**DANGER ZONE:** A lack of  
forgiveness impairs your mental health.  
Seek psychological help.

### What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness means giving up your rights to retribution and not holding the offense against the offender even though you know they will probably re-offend and do it again. Forgiving an offender does not mean we agree or condone their actions. I will also caution the reader not to forgive too soon without considering the risks.

Forgiving is not the same as forgetting because you will always remember a painful event. However, it does mean choosing not to recall. Recalling is the conscious choice to bring the event up and ruminate upon it. We will all experience flashbacks of the painful offense from time to time. I am not referring to the resurfacing memories that are beyond our control. Recalling an event at will is a way of re-victimizing yourself. Choosing to recall and dwell on an offense fuel our anger, and keeps us stuck in the past. In essence, it keeps us locked in a feedback loop as our anger justifies us hating the offender and thus blaming them for our fixation and trap.

Forgiveness is never deserved, and it cannot be earned. We must grant it, and to



go a step further, our brain functions best when we give forgiveness without qualifications or justifications. Forgiving someone that wrongs you, perpetrates against you, again and again, is no easy feat. Forgiving others is not for the weak. It takes a strength of character (Norman, 2017) to pull it off, not just once, but daily.

Forgiveness is not the same as condoning. Sometimes we are reluctant to forgive because we mistakenly believe it permits others to re-offend. It does not require reconciliation (Weir, 2017). The hardest lesson to learn and accept is that each offense is independent and needs to be independently forgiven. Our brains like to take shortcuts and lump past wrongs into one. It's easy to label and discount the way others change. This comes from a regressed brain in survival mode (Schnarch, 2018).

#### *What good does it do?*

Thus, the debate begins. Some argue that it lets the offender off the hook and permits them to continue re-offending. With so many racial inequalities and micro-aggressions, what's the purpose of forgiving?

According to a study by McFarland, Smith, Tousaint, and Thomas (2012) found that forgiveness was beneficial and protective for blacks but not whites. Their study looked at the impact of race, neighborhoods, and forgiveness on health. Their results suggest the deleterious effects of racial resentment on the black study participants' health. The results showed a positive correlation between forgiveness and health for the black participants. There was no health impact or benefit for the white participants. The discussion concludes there is no improvement in the white participants because

they had not suffered the adverse health effects that the black participants suffered.

Felitti et al. (1998) discussed the effects of trauma on health in a previous study commissioned by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). The result of traumatic behaviors was demonstrated in the CDC and Kiser Perinate analysis of Adverse Childhood Effects Study (Felitti et al., 1998). That study highlighted the long-term effects of behaviors on health outcomes.

What does the Bible say about forgiveness?

In the book of Matthew, the apostle Peter asks Jesus a question of forgiveness. If we look closer at his question, Peter asked about forgiveness's limitations. "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him, seven times? While Jesus' reply was to forgive seventy times seven. It does not mean start counting the offenses, but essentially, forgiveness is countless.

Granted, to forgive, we do not need to wait for others to recognize what they have done wrong to grant them the gift of forgiveness. Jesus provided an excellent example of the highest brain functioning when he was dying on the cross. He said, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Growth and maturity*

Forgiveness, love, and resentment cannot coexist. We must consciously nurture forgiveness. Unchecked bitterness is free to grow wild like a weed pushing out the flowers. What we choose, feed and water will always grow. The antidote to life's ailments is forgiveness. Forgiveness is rarely for the offender. It is for ourselves, especially if we

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4. MySword Bible app, World English Bible version.

choose not to continue a relationship with the offender. Forgiveness frees us and cuts the tie between the offender and our self. Thus, forgiveness allows us to move forward and frees us from the offender and the past to pursue growth and maturity.

How do you forgive something more significant than a person, like a history, the government, or systemic injustice? To help my clients process and move through forgiveness, I developed a handout titled, “10 Steps of Forgiveness” (Jenkins, 2014). I’ve included the steps below. Forgiving is a process, not a one-time event.

### **10 Steps of Forgiveness**

1. Acknowledge the hurt and pain caused by the offense.
2. Recognize which of your values were violated.
3. Consider how the offense will affect you in the long term, mid-term and short-term.
4. Distinguish the person from the offense and recognize the person is responsible but not defined by the offense.
5. Choose not to re-victimize yourself by not recalling and dwelling on the event.
6. Acknowledge your limitations and that you have no control over the person.
7. Give up your rights to retribution and revenge.
8. If you plan to continue the relationship with the person, define your future expectation and consequences.
9. Recognize what you are grateful for.

10. Repeat the above process daily as needed.

### **11. Final Thoughts**

While it is vitally important, this article does not address the role of self-forgiveness, its importance in the overall health and healing within the communities of color. My aim here is to help the reader elevate their functioning and general awareness and the role of forgiveness within their lives. Forgiveness is one way to intentionally use a higher-level brain function to promote growth and health (Moawad, 2018). Resentment keeps us locked into regressed, primitive brain functioning. If you can’t forgive on your own, for the sake of your health and your brain, get help.

The lessons I have learned working with clients in a clinical setting also apply to congregations and communities. While I want all people to benefit from this article, admittedly, I want people of color to take advantage of this information, thrive, and flourish from a higher functioning level. Some individuals may refuse to forgive and hold resentment of systemic racism and specific racist events. Too often, people of color remain traumatized and immobilized by victimizing themselves all over again through resentments. Holding onto resentment keeps us from healing and moving forward. Forgiveness might not relieve the pain of the past but can remove pain from our future (Norman, 2017). The act of forgiving liberates the soul.

I want to give people the reason and motivation to operate from the best of themselves and gain the benefits and freedom that forgiveness offers. Give yourself every advantage possible. The lazy way out is to do nothing. According to Weir (2017), health and mental health benefits are indisputable.

I love how scientific knowledge catches up and aligns with Biblical principles. However, if you're a believer, the consequences are dire. For the sake of your health and your soul, it's to your advantage to forgive.

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## FORGIVENESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

*Adam and Eve's perfect relationship was broken because the first couple mistrusted and disobeyed God's word. They were forgiven in the same way as we are today, namely by accepting the Messiah's death on their behalf. To them was given the Proto-Gospel of Gen 3:15, and the Promised-Seed foretold of the solution they could not of themselves create as confirmed in Rev 13:8. Their forgiveness was based upon grace already streaming from the cross. The model of forgiveness was given by God Himself as He takes the initiative and calls sinners back to Himself: "Where are you?" The story of the fiery serpents in Numbers 21 is another example showing that we are forgiven by looking to Jesus (Num 21:8–9; John 3:14–15; 12:32). The sacrificial system was not the solution to the problem of sin, it only provided examples showing how salvation works. Forgiveness has always come directly from God as David testifies; Psalms 32 and 51 are primary examples. Sacrifices were God's means of teaching the horrifying consequences of sin and the cost of forgiveness as they were pointing to Jesus's sacrificial death. Hosea is an extreme case of how God wants to assure people that He forgives those who repent. As God forgives us, so we should be willing to forgive because brokenness can be healed by forgiveness, opening the way for the rebuilding of meaningful relationships.*

The objective of this article is to demonstrate how and on what basis people were forgiven in Old Testament times and beyond. This recognition helps us to know how we may receive forgiveness from our gracious God today, and what effect it has on our vertical and horizontal relationships.

### **Only God Can Forgive**

A popular misunderstanding regarding forgiveness as revealed in the Hebrew Bible is the claim that believers in Old Testament times were forgiven because they were offering animal sacrifices. This is far from reality. It is true that believers had to sacrifice when

they sinned (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22),<sup>1</sup> but the sacrifices were only a God-appointed means by which sinners could approach the Holy God who descended to them and offered forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> The whole sacrificial system

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1. However, no sacrifices were prescribed for grievous sins like adultery, murder, idolatry, or eating unclean food. These sins were forgivable without any rituals but directly forgiven by God (see, for example, Ps 51:1–11; cf. Ezek 33:25–26). Regarding the different types of sacrifices, consult especially Leviticus 1–7.

2. Sacrifices were not (1) food for God because He provides food for all and to Him everything belongs (Pss 24:1; 50:8–13; 104:21), or (2) appeasing an angry God because He provides the atonement and reconciliation (Deut 32:43; Ezek 16:63; Dan 9:24). These pagan motifs were in opposition to the biblical rationale behind the sacrifices.

pointed to Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God; the blood of sacrifices was directing believers to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ and His shed blood (Gen 3:15, 21; Exod 12:12-13; John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5:12). The Epistle to Hebrews is plain in this regard: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb 10:4, 11-12 NIV; cf. Heb 9:12-14; 10:19).<sup>3</sup> The sacrificial system was the teaching tool, an object lesson, of how costly and ugly sin is and how God forgives and saves sinners. Sacrifices were the means of receiving a tangible assurance of forgiveness and the acceptance of His offer of salvation, but sacrifices were unable to provide forgiveness as only God makes atonement for our sins. Forgiveness is also secured through the New Covenant (Jer 33:31, 33-34), which is nothing else than a renewal of God’s original covenantal intent from the very beginning.

In order to comprehend the necessity and beauty of forgiveness, one needs to understand the nature of sin. Sin is primarily a relational term as it breaks our relationship with God, and we attempt to live independently from Him. Evil is a terrible destroyer of life, everything meaningful, beautiful, good, and prosperous. There is no future in trespassing the principles of life.

The Bible’s colorful, wide-ranging terminology for sin reveals its devastating nature. The rich biblical vocabulary demonstrates

the complexity of sin. The trilogy of sin—the strongest biblical language consists of the following terms: (1) *battah* (most common term for sin in the sense of missing the target, deviate from a right way, or going astray from a straight path; the Greek word *hamartia* expresses the same idea), (2) *avon* (transgression, something which is bent, twisted, or crooked), and (3) *peshah* (rebellion, revolt). Besides these three main words for sin, the Bible contains additional terms that describe the complexity of sin and of our sinful nature. Additional vocabulary includes evil, guilt, wickedness, trespass, impurity, deceit, dishonesty, falsehood, offense, abomination, desecration, perversion, unrighteousness, error, injustice, arrogance, failure, etc.<sup>4</sup> The most frequent common Hebrew word for forgiveness is *salah*. It is what God does. In the Septuagint (LXX), this term is usually translated “to be merciful *or* gracious.” Another word for forgiveness is *nasah*, which means “lifting up,” “carrying,” or “taking away.”

The truth is that it was always God Himself who forgave people’s sins and gave them peace and joy as a sign of the blotting out of their sins. Every sin is an offence against God because He is our Creator and Redeemer, and thus our Judge (Eccl 12:13–14; 2 Cor 5:10). Consequently, we are accountable to Him and responsible for our actions, so we cannot do with our bodies

4. “One may count over fifty words for ‘sin’ in biblical Hebrew, if specific as well as generic terms are isolated” (Freedman et al., 1992, 6:31). There are 7 main Greek words which describe the plethora of sin in the New Testament (*hamartia*, *paraptoma*, *parakoe*, *adikia*, *asebeia*, *kakia*, and *opheiletes*). For details on the biblical Hebrew and Greek terminology on sin and the concept and understanding of sin, see Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (1988, 4:518–525); George Arthur Buttrick et al. (1962, 4:361–376); William Dyrness (1977, pp. 99–110).

3. Biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.



and life whatever we wish. Joseph said to Potiphar's wife after she urged him to sleep with her: "You are his wife. So how could I do an evil thing like that? How could I sin against God?" (Gen 39:9 NIRV). After committing adultery with Bathsheba and letting Uriah be killed, David confesses: "You (the Lord) are the one I've really sinned against. I've done what is evil in your sight. So you are right when you sentence me. You are fair when you judge me" (Ps 51:4 NIRV).

The golden text of the Old Testament expresses the most beautiful truth about God's character and His willingness to forgive: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exod 34:6-7).<sup>5</sup> This powerful self-revelation of God proclaims that God is ready to forgive our sin, any of them. The trilogy of our misbehavior is announced: wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Key biblical passages mention this tripod of human mischiefs: at the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:16, 21, 30); by David (Ps 32:1-2); the work of the Servant of the Lord (Isa 53:5-6, 11-12); and by Daniel in the 70-week prophecy (Dan 9:24). Our Lord is ready to forgive our trespasses. The living God of the Bible is a forgiving God who loves, is compassionate and gracious, patient, faithful, caring, holy, and just.

5. God's proclamation is a golden thread throughout the Bible (Num 14:17-18; Jonah 4:2). Our God is a forgiving God (Pss 86:5; 130:3-4). He forgives all our confessed sins: all *chatat*, *avon* and *pasha*. The sins that the Holy Spirit convinces us about yet we stubbornly cultivate them will grow into rebellion if we do not confess them, which is called in theology the unpardonable sin. This was the attitude of Egypt's Pharaoh.

We make mistakes because we are sinners, but God wants to help us when we long for a better life and give Him the burden of our sin. We need forgiveness, and God is ready to do His work. Prophets declare: "*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more*" (Isa 43:25). "*I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me*" (Jer 33:8). *The psalmists powerfully state: "But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults"* (Ps 19:12). "*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven; whose sins are covered*" (Ps 32:1). "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us*" (Ps 103:12). "But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you...He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins" (Ps 130:4, 8).

### **Struggle for the Right Picture of God**

The necessity of forgiveness was presented in the Garden of Eden. The anatomy of the first sin begins with Satan's attempt to create a false picture of God, to misrepresent Him, to put Him in a false light, discredit and ridicule Him, and thus create a monster out of Him. Everything wrong started in the mind of Adam and Eve with their distrust of God and His word, and with their feeling that they were missing something important in life.

Trust is the essential and foundational element of all meaningful relationships; everything hangs on it. It is a quality of life without which nothing can function properly. We trust only a person we know that has our best interest in mind, who loves, cares, is unselfish, gracious, and has an understanding of our heart. Wrong doing

breaks that trust relationship and is built on selfishness. Sin alienates people from one another: “Their sense of themselves and their relationship with each other is shattered” (Bartholomew and Goheen, 2014, p. 41). “Sin has undermined both the sense of self and the sense of belonging to another” (Bartholomew and Goheen, p. 42). Sinners refuse to accept their accountability for wrong behavior. Eve blamed the serpent for the seduction. Adam not only blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit but actually blamed God because it was God who gave her to him. Self-vindication causes one to find fault beyond and not within oneself. Disobedience brought death because the relationship with real life was broken (Gen 2:17; 3:3, 19; cf. Rom 6:23).

### **The Paradigm of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness in the Old Testament is built on God’s grace and not on human achievements, ceremonies, rituals, or even obedience (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 40:6–8; Micah 6:6–8). The model of God’s grace begins with the Lord who is in search of His lost children. Adam and Eve were hiding because they did not follow God’s word and broke their love relationship with Him. After Adam and Eve sinned, God comes with His grace, and instead of extinguishing them, He makes a most astonishing announcement—a resolution to their desperate situation.

First, God comes to Adam and Eve with grace. He cries for His lost and missing

children: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9).<sup>6</sup> Because of the divine and undeserved grace that streamed from Calvary, they could live (Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). Sinners are lost, however God graciously calls all sinners back to Himself as He called Adam and Eve (see, for example, Isa 45:22; Ezek 18:31–32; Joel 2:12–14). He provides immediate forgiveness; they did not instantly die. Nevertheless, the consequences of their disobedience will have long-term influence until God renews everything by bringing the final and lasting solution to the problem of evil (Eph 1:10; Phil 2:9–11; Rev 15:4).<sup>7</sup>

Second, God provides a real garment (Gen 3:21). As the nakedness of the first couple was more than a physical phenomenon, so it follows analogically that the garment represents more than physical dress. There is a contrast in the biblical text between “they made” and “He made.” What Adam and Eve could not do for themselves, to cover their guilt and shame, God did for them. He gave them His garment of skin, and thus He covers sinners with the garment of His righteousness (1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Rev 7:14; 22:14), which indicates that He sacrificed the first animal in order to provide them with the solution to their sin problem in view of the Messiah.

Third, God promises to send the Seed (Gen 3:15b), who will defeat their enemy,

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6. The Lord’s question “Where are you?” has multiple purposes: (1) an invitation to dialogue; (2) an offer of grace (God did not come to kill them but to provide a very costly solution to their new situation as sinners; Gen 3:15, 21; 1 Pet 1:20); (3) help them realize their altered attitude toward Him (instead of enjoying His presence they were hiding from Him); and (4) a trial/investigative judgment, because they were accountable to God as their Creator for their past actions. God is presented here as their Judge.

7. For details, see Moskala (2018, pp. 119–143).

Satan. The Messiah will become humanity's Redeemer and Savior, and His victorious deliberate death will ultimately destroy Satan and consequently everyone and everything associated with him. The Messiah is the Victor and gives victory to all who connect with Him (Rom 8:1–4). The final victory is assured by Him (Rev 12:7–12; 19:6–7, 15–21; Jude 24–25).

### **Restoration of the Character Integrity**

It is one thing to accept forgiveness, but the other is for the transgressor to be changed through the process of cleansing, healing, restoration, and transformation (Ps 32:1–2). The offence distorts the character of the offender. David in the description of the happiness of the forgiven person culminates with the crucial statement, “and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (Ps 32:2 ESV). The spirit here means character. The truly forgiven person goes through the catharsis and agony of the transformation of his character. The result of genuine repentance is that the offender becomes a better person. This change comes from within, from a shift of thinking and a transformation of the heart by God's grace. Forgiveness is a way of life; it is a step forward in the right direction (Rom 12:1–2; 2 Cor 3:18).

### **To Forgive is Divine**

“To err is human; to forgive, divine” (Pope, 1966, p. 160). For the first time this profound phrase was expressed by English poet Alexander Pope in *An Essay on Criticism* in 1711. Indeed, to forgive is not natural for us. We like retaliation, revenge, and punishment. We all make mistakes and err, and in relationship to others we should seek to do as God does and show grace and forgiveness. The power to forgive comes from

above, from outside of us. God is willing to give us power to truly forgive.

God wants to teach us to be willing to forgive those who hurt or betray us, and trespass against us. This process is not easy. How can you forgive an offender who cheated on you, ruined your reputation, killed or critically injured your child in a car accident, slept with your spouse, stole your identity, divorced you, beat you, murdered or abused someone in your family (to name only a few terrible offenses)? Forgiveness is an offer of love to those who hurt, hate, damage, exploit, torture, love poorly, cheat, and betray. So, there is a need to forgive what is impossible to forget. “What matters is how things are remembered, not that they are remembered. Forgiving neither requires nor implies forgetting” (Govier, 2002; p. 60). Let God deal with all hurts and injustice.

The Babylonians were extremely vicious. They murdered, stole, burned, tortured, uprooted, and deported Israel to their country as slaves. Prophet Habakkuk describes them as “ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own,” “feared and dreaded,” “law to themselves” (Hab 1:6–7). Yet the prophet Jeremiah calls the Israelites to not take vengeance but to pray for them: “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into

exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer 29:4 NIV). To forgive what is not excusable and forgivable is true forgiveness. One cannot lighten the offense which harms, hurts, and breaks relationships. Forgiveness is never easy and simple. Leaving judgment to God, liberates.

Forgiving is always hard, but we are able to forgive offenders through the divine power of the Holy Spirit. Examples of a person forgiving another person(s) includes Joseph who forgave his brothers (Gen 50:17) and David who forgave Nabal because of Nabal’s wife Abigail’s wise intervention (1 Sam 25:28). When we forgive others as God forgave us by extending grace to offenders, then we bear the characteristics of our heavenly Lord. Hosea forgave his unfaithful wife; this is an extreme case of how God wants to assure people that He forgives those who repent (Hosea 3:1-5; 14:1-6).

The restoration of the vertical relationship is the beginning to repairing horizontal relationships. Only when we respect an authority (the living God) outside of ourselves can we build true relationships. Otherwise, we put our self, our ego, our selfishness, and self-centeredness above all, and this will choke meaningful family ties, marriage, fellowship, community life, partnership, and friendship. Respect for God is the root of all other pertinent connections. Only when we respect God first, will we then respect others who were created to His image. Valid and appropriate things do not occur by themselves, automatically, but by constant effort. The result is a wonder, a miracle, when in this world of tensions, darkness, violence, divisions and sin, things can function normally, beautifully, and meaningfully, and

bring happiness, satisfaction, and joy. These results come from above.

### **Summary of Old Testament Characteristics of Forgiveness**

1. Forgiveness comes from the Lord. Only God can forgive since every sin is aimed against Him. When David says that “against you, against you only I have sinned” in Psalm 51:4, he is stating that he sinned primarily and truly against God. He indeed sinned also against Uriah, Bathsheba, himself, family, reputation, but ultimately against the Holy Creator. Forgiving for God does not mean excusing the guilty, condoning the evil, or forgetting what happened but giving a possibility of a new start.
1. God always takes the first step in forgiving sinners. He is the initiator of reconciliation. Adam and Eve sinned, and they were hiding from His Presence, but God called them back.
2. Forgiveness is costly, never cheap. To receive forgiveness, the life of the sinner was replaced by the death of an innocent animal (Gen 22:13; Lev 4:4–3; 5:5–6; 17:11). The process of forgiveness is only achieved through a sacrifice. Sadly, it can take years to process some offenses as forgiveness hurts, but at the end liberates.
3. Forgiveness brings hope into a hopeless and unforgivable situation. We do not need to be victims of our past if we learn how to go forward in a responsible way.

4. God identifies with victims, with the marginalized, oppressed, poor, strangers, orphans, and widows. He feels with them. Prophet Isaiah explains that our God is always on the side of those who are hurt for He suffers with those who suffer: “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them” (Isa 63:9 ESV). In our troubles, distress, and pain, He is with us to help.
5. Blessed are those who experience forgiveness; it is God’s action for them when they confess their sins. They can have full assurance and joy of salvation (Ps 32:1–5; Ps 51:1–11; 1 John 1:7, 9).
6. There is no forgiveness without genuine confession (Lev 5:5; Prov 28:13). Any sin an individual openly, honestly, and sincerely confesses, God forgives. An oppressor needs to ask for it. The Psalmist states it clearly: “For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Ps 32:4–6 ESV; cf. 1 John 1:7-9). The perpetrator needs to be aware and admit that he or she committed an unjustifiable and inappropriate act which brought harm, and then show remorse for what happened. The act itself was wrong, so true repentance and forgiveness go hand to hand in the Bible. God said to Solomon: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chr 7:14).
7. Forgiveness does not negate the consequences of sin. Adam and Eve had to go outside of the Garden of Eden and live in a new sinful world. Some offenses bring more severe consequences than others in life. An offender needs to take responsibility for their wrongdoing and not blame God, other people, or circumstances of life for what happened.
8. As God forgives us, so we should be willing to forgive those who transgress against us and be willing to forgive and accept forgiveness (Deut 10:17-22; Col 3:13). Always be willing to offer forgiveness and to forgive.
9. Forgiveness is a complex process and involves all parties. To forgive others and to forgive yourself for failing and doing wrong is equally important.
10. To restore broken relationships, reparation must be undertaken. For example, if someone stole something in biblical times, he was obliged to return it, ask for forgiveness, and pay an additional 20% of the value (see, for example, Lev 5:15-16; 6:4–5; 22:14; cf. 27:13, 15, 19, 27, 31). Damage incurred



needs to be repaired, and this is an important principle. It is not only about “I am sorry, forgive me,” but compensation has to follow whenever it is appropriate and possible.

11. Forgiveness means committing the offender to God’s just judgment. Only to God belongs vengeance (Deut 32:35; Ps 37:1, 7–9; 94:1; Isa 47:3).

### **Power to Victory**

Faith brings victory over hurts and deep wounds. “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4; cf. Jude 24). However, faith is not our Savior but only a means by which we receive God’s victory for ourselves. Faith is a relationship of trust; it is a reliance upon God’s Word. Saving faith is not an innate quality of believers and not our achievement but a gift of God (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29; Jude 3). At the same time, it must be stressed that we are responsible if we do not believe, because faith is communicated through hearing the Gospel (Rom 10:17). This is a biblical paradox. There is no way we can on our own overcome hatred, feelings of rage, and vengeance, only God can solve these issues within us and give us victory over it by His extra-human power. Victory comes from an external source outside of us as a gift from God through faith (Ezek 36:25–28). We can fight against different symptoms of sin, try to overcome wrong habits, but what we really need is a transformation of our heart, the experience of a new birth, a pure heart (Ps 51:10; John 3:3, 5).

Forgiveness is God’s grace put into practice. If we do not forgive, we become slaves to our negative emotions that can choke our vitality, joy, and spiritual life.

Forgiveness liberates and makes our life easier. Forgiveness is about our decision and commitment. When we forgive, we win over our pride, hate, and anger. The decision to let God be in charge of the situation and not ourselves is a sign that the grace of God is changing our thinking and actions (Lev 19:17–18).

The good news is that God regenerates our hearts, forgives all our sins, liberates us from the bondage of sin, and transforms our lives ((Ps 51:7–12; Isa 1:16–19; Rom 12:1–2; 2 Cor 5:17; 1 John 1:8–8; 3:1–3). If the Son Jesus Christ gives freedom, we are indeed free (John 12:31–32). Sin began with pride but is defeated by humility. There is hope for us because sin was overcome by the humble person Jesus Christ who is the Guarantor of freedom, peace, and joy.

The approach to forgiveness was the same in the intertestamental period as it was in Old Testament times. There is a beautiful harmony and continuation between the Old and New Testaments in this regard. It was always God who was the Author and Giver of forgiveness. Also today God’s grace enables us to show mercy and forgive the unforgivable. His Spirit and Word provide power to act divinely and do what is unthinkable, namely to forgive others and forgive ourselves for what we did wrong because we have put all our sins, offences, hurts, and wounds on our sin-bearing Savior. He takes care of the burden of wrong doing. We do not need to worry when we put it into His care because we asked for His forgiveness. He is a loving, truthful, just, and faithful Judge, Savior, Lord, and King, and He is a merciful Father (Deut 32:6; Ps 68:5; Isa 63:16; 64:8).



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## THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

*This article addresses Luke's concept of the forgiveness of sins. This concept is to be contrasted with therapeutic concepts of forgiveness that prioritize the psychological and emotional experience of the victim and which have become prevalent in the west, including in many western churches, as society has moved away from virtue-based morality in pursuit of the therapeutic goal of inner serenity and freedom from anxiety. In contrast, Luke's concept of the forgiveness of sins involves the victim forgoing his or her right to retributive justice in order to enable the restoration of relationship. The sin rather than the person is forgiven. Such forgiveness is not unconditional but requires the perpetrator to recognize their error, express contrition, and seek the cancellation of their legally defined obligations. When these conditions are met, the victim is under the costly obligation to forgive the incurred legal and/or moral debt and forgo restitution. Forgiveness thereby removes a significant barrier to the restoration of relationship.*

### Introduction

The topic of forgiveness in the New Testament is too broad to address in an article of this length. As such, we will focus on an important concept in the Gospel of Luke—the 'forgiveness of sins'.<sup>1</sup> Luke's concept of forgiveness primarily relates to divine forgiveness of human sin. Nevertheless, it includes important lessons for our understanding of the nature of forgiveness within family settings. Forgiveness was a counter-cultural concept in the first-century Greco-Roman world for which revenge was the

norm and forgiveness a sign of weakness.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, forgiveness is increasingly countercultural today.<sup>3</sup> Our contemporary emphasis on individual autonomy has reduced the significance of forgiveness and reconciliation, both designed to promote and maintain the increasingly undervalued practice of community.<sup>4</sup> Our preoccupation with the cult of progress has resulted in a hesitancy to return to the past—as required by forgiveness—to deal with earlier wrongs. Our zeitgeist encourages us simply to forget and move on towards a brighter future. In such a context it is easy for our understanding and practice of forgiveness to be shaped

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1. Cf. Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God's Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012), 268-69; David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold, eds., *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Tim Carter, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2016).

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2. Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 2.

3. Steven W. Webster, *American Rage: How Anger Shapes our Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

4. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 37.

more by our surrounding culture than by sound scriptural principles.

Luke's concept of the forgiveness of sins has often been dealt with in a piecemeal manner in which the narrative context of his statements is ignored.<sup>5</sup> In broad terms, Luke-Acts presents a story of divine salvation in which God works through Jesus, the king of Israel, to reassert his sovereignty over Israel and the nations. As our sovereign, Jesus is also our savior. As our savior, he offers his blood to establish the new covenant, one benefit of which is the forgiveness of sins (Luke 22:20; cf. Jer. 31:33-34). In Luke's theology, forgiveness is closely associated with the concepts of repentance, conversion, and faith, concepts which, according to François Bovon, are in a "certain fluctuation" together.<sup>6</sup> The approach of this article is to construct a composite picture of Lukan forgiveness by considering a number of references to forgiveness within their immediate narrative contexts. First, however, we must contrast New Testament forgiveness with what has become the dominant alternative in the west—therapeutic forgiveness.

### Forgiveness as the cancellation of debt

The most common term used for forgiveness in the New Testament is *aphiēmi* 'to forgive', used 34 times in Luke-Acts. The primary sense of the word is to send away (*apo*, 'from', *hiēmi*, 'to send', Matt. 13:6; Mark 4:36; 8:13; John 20:23) or to leave someone or something (e.g., Matt. 5:24; 22:22; Mark 1:18). The causing of separation is the central idea. It may also denote,

among its other meanings, to "release from legal or moral obligation or consequence", to cancel, remit or pardon something.<sup>7</sup> This may relate to (a) debts, whether financial or moral (*opheilēmata*, Matt. 6:12; cf. 18:27, 32), and (b) sins, (e.g., Matt. 9:2, 5, 6; "the intent of your heart", Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9). The cognate noun of *aphiēmi* is *aphesis*, used ten times in Luke-Acts and which denotes a cancellation of debt or penalty. In eight of these instances, it is followed by 'of sins'.<sup>8</sup>

This concept of forgiveness as removal of debt or cancellation of penalty has the important implication that forgiveness of sin primarily addresses the sin rather than the perpetrator, that is, it is the penalty that is removed. We forgive the debt, not the person. Tim Carter highlights the pastoral importance of this aspect of forgiveness. Forgiveness is less about "relinquishing any personal feelings of animosity against the perpetrator" and more about forgoing the "pursuit of justice and redress."<sup>9</sup> Reducing forgiveness to a change in emotions towards the perpetrator leaves open the possibility that, while God may let go of any feelings of anger he may have towards us as sinners, he could still legally press for our punishment. The good news is that divine forgiveness primarily relates to God's "willingness to see the perpetrator forgo the penalty due them for what they have done."<sup>10</sup> To reiterate, we forgive the sin rather than the sin-

5. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 138.

6. François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2nd ed, 2006), 308.

7. BDAG, p. 156. On the role of obligations, gifts and reciprocity, in Greco-Roman culture, see John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 24-50.

8. *aphesin hamartiōn* (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:7; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; cf. Matt. 26:26; Mark 1:4; Col. 1:14) and *tēn apheresin tōn paraptōmatōn* (Eph. 1:7).

9. Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 7.

10. Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 8.

ner. Through an act of will we cancel a debt, an act made somewhat independent of our feelings towards the perpetrator.

Let me press this point a little further. Biblical forgiveness may be contrasted with what Gregory Jones calls ‘therapeutic forgiveness’.<sup>11</sup> Biblical forgiveness, while involving a therapeutic element, is predicated upon the concept of justice, and justice is predicated upon the concepts of right and wrong. To illustrate, if someone intentionally irreparably damages your eye, retributive justice identifies this as a wrong action that requires that the perpetrator lose an eye in return—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (cf. Exod. 21:23-25). She must pay the debt of justice, whether in this life or on the day of judgment. In this context, forgiveness involves the victim forgoing his right to retributive justice by forgiving or cancelling the perpetrator’s debt. The perpetrator can keep her eye even though you have lost yours.

Western culture has moved from being a ‘moral demand system’ based upon biblical definitions of right and wrong to being, as Philip Rieff identified in 1967 in his important critique of emerging American and UK cultures, a therapeutic culture in which our primary goal is to achieve inner serenity and the removal of anxiety.<sup>12</sup> This shift has resulted in a related transformation in how we understand forgiveness. Rather than the forgoing of justice—the forgiveness of a justice debt—a laying aside of one’s legal rights, what one therapy website criticizes as ‘legal mercy’, forgiveness has become an issue for

our inner self.<sup>13</sup> It is intensely psychological and inward focused. Its goal is to transform the emotions through enacting a change in thinking, a process that rarely requires public rebuke or repentance (cf. Luke 17:4). Therapeutic forgiveness principally focuses on transformation of the inner world of the victim rather than the transformation of a relationship through a recognition of the demands of justice and the cancellation of related moral debt. Therapeutic forgiveness is primarily, suggests Jones, an inner transformation of the emotions rather than the forgoing of justice within a legal and moral framework.<sup>14</sup> It is the hope of this author that this consideration of forgiveness in Luke will contribute to the restoration of a more biblical understanding of forgiveness rather than the alternative on offer in our contemporary culture.

### **1. Forgiveness of sins leads to a knowledge of salvation (Luke 1:77)**

The first reference we find in the Gospel to forgiveness is in the description of John the Baptist’s ministry in Luke 1:77. Its context is the prophecy uttered by the Spirit-filled Zechariah praising the ‘Lord God of Israel’ for raising up a ‘mighty saviour’ (1:67, 69) in the ‘house of his servant David’ who would save Israel from their enemies (1:71) and “from the hand of all who hate us” (1:71). This act of salvation is a demonstration of Yahweh’s faithfulness to the covenant he swore to their ancestor

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11. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 35-69.

12. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), 15.

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13. TherapistAid, “Forgiveness Information Sheet,” in <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/forgiveness-therapy>: TherapistAid LLC, 2017.

14. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 48.

Abraham (1:73).<sup>15</sup> The purpose of saving Israel from their enemies is that they might “serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness” (1:74-75). In this context of national deliverance, Zechariah’s son will be called “the prophet of the Most High”, and he will go before the Lord to prepare his way (1:76). This preparation involves giving knowledge of salvation:

And you, child, will be called the prophet  
of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to pre-  
pare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation (*gnōsin*  
*sōtērias*) to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins (*en aphesei*  
*hamartiōn autōn*). (Luke 1:76-77)

This knowledge of salvation is closely associated with “the forgiveness of their sins” (1:77). The experience of forgiveness brings knowledge of salvation. Of course, pursuing or achieving salvation is not a priority of our contemporary culture. Rieff contrasts earlier ‘religious man’ with our contemporary ‘psychological man’: “Religious man is born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased.”<sup>16</sup> The therapeutic forgiveness beloved by psychological man is entirely unrelated to the concept of salvation.

Specifically how Lukan forgiveness relates to the knowledge of salvation is somewhat ambiguous. Three main interpretations

may be identified:<sup>17</sup> (1) *Defining salvation*: some commentators understand “by/in the forgiveness of sins” as defining the nature of the salvation John is to announce.<sup>18</sup> In this interpretation, salvation consists of the forgiveness of sins. It is no more, no less. This is a plausible interpretation if we assume that this is an instance of poetic parallelism, in which statement B (“forgiveness of sins”) further explains statement A (“knowledge of salvation”). A weakness of this interpretation is that in Luke the concept of salvation includes but extends beyond forgiveness (cf. 4:18-19); (2) *Enabling salvation*: others take “by/in the forgiveness of sins” as indicating the means by which salvation is obtained.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, salvation is achieved through the forgiveness of sins. This interpretation may be critiqued on the same basis as the first interpretation—it is based upon an overly narrow definition of salvation; (3) *Making salvation known*: still others have taken “by/in the forgiveness of sins” as modifying the act of giving knowledge, the forgiveness of sins being the means by which

15. On the central role of Yahweh as Savior in this account, see Nina Henrichs-Tarasenkova, *Luke’s Christology of Divine Identity* (LNTS 542: London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 91-112. For discussion and critique of the forgiveness of sins as the end of national exile, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 126-27, 268-74; Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 127-81.  
16. Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 24-25.

17. Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 1—11* (Dallas: SIL International, 2nd ed, 2008), 72.

18. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (ICC: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 5th ed, 1922), 42-43; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC: Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 93.

19. Alfred R. C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 90. Martin Culy, et al., suggest that *en aphesei hamartiōn autōn* may be taken as reference (“salvation, namely, the forgiveness of sins”) or instrumental (“salvation ... by the forgiveness of sins”). Martin M. Culy, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Joshua J. Stigall, *Luke: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 61.



God will make salvation known.<sup>20</sup> The act of forgiving sins results in a knowledge of salvation, an understanding of how God will deliver Israel. In this interpretation, “by the forgiveness of sins” is understood in an instrumental sense, informing the reader as to how the knowledge of salvation will be made known.

The syntax of the Greek text permits all three readings.<sup>21</sup> While recognizing such ambiguities we may still affirm the strong emphasis in Zechariah’s speech on salvation as national deliverance from their enemies, a deliverance closely associated in Luke 1:77 with the forgiveness of sins.<sup>22</sup> We may draw a parallel between the need of the nation to be saved and the need for families to be saved. Families fight with families. In this context, liberation from such conflict requires forgiveness to be at the heart of the transformation process.

#### *When the victim needs forgiveness*

The syntactically ambiguous association of the forgiveness of the sins of Israel with salvation, framed earlier in Zechariah’s prophecy as deliverance of Israel from its enemies, is extremely challenging pastorally. Common sense dictates that forgiveness of Israel’s sins, in this case the sins of a

victim in relation to Israel’s relationship to Rome, is not a precondition for or part of the process of deliverance from the oppression of others. We do not normally encourage victims of abuse to request forgiveness for their own failings in order to escape the physically and emotional clutches of their perpetrator. But this is what we have in Zechariah’s prophecy. Israel needs its own sins to be forgiven as part of the process of being saved from its enemies.

This reasoning is not unique to Zechariah in that he stands in a rich biblical tradition that affirms the need of God’s people to receive forgiveness of their own sins as part of the process of deliverance from the sins of others (cf. Ps 106:1-48; Dan. 9:3-19). Such a requirement implies a recognition that Israel’s sins contributed in some sense to its status as victim. We should not, of course, extrapolate from this the principle that all victims have contributed to their status as a result of their own moral failings. Nevertheless, we may affirm the contribution that having our own sins forgiven makes to our knowledge of the nature of salvation. While salvation is a broader process than forgiveness, forgiveness is the first step towards comprehending salvation. Receiving the forgiveness of our own sins strengthens our conviction that God will deal with other problems we face. It informs us that we ourselves are sinners in need of a savior. If I may return to the topic of therapeutic forgiveness, it counters our cultural preoccupation with defining ourselves always as victims.<sup>23</sup> We need to confess our own sins. Biblical forgiveness requires that even when we may be in a particular instance the victim, that we nevertheless repent of the

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20. E.g., R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 110; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (trans. Christine M. Thomas; Hermeneia 63A: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 75-76.

21. Martin Culy, et al., suggest that *en aphesei hamartiōn autōn* may be taken as reference (“salvation, namely, the forgiveness of sins”) or instrumental (“salvation ... by the forgiveness of sins”). Culy, Parsons, and Stigall, *Luke*, 61.

22. David A. S. Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (JSNTSupS 119: Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 24-49.

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23. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 50.

wrongs we have done to others as part of the salvation process.

## 2. Forgiveness of sins requires repentance (Luke 3:3; 17:3-4; 24:47)

Our next reference to forgiveness is found in Luke 3:3 in which John the Baptist is described as going “into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (*baptisma metanoias eis aphasin hamartiōn*). Luke reflects Mark 1:4 in retaining the wording, a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. In contrast, Matthew has dropped any reference to the forgiveness of sins, instead retaining the imperative to repent, possibly out of a desire to retain the prerogative of forgiveness for Jesus (cf. Matt. 3:1). Luke’s phraseology is theologically very significant in that it disavows unconditional forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> Forgiveness is more than positive thinking on the part of the victim. It requires repentance on the part of the perpetrator. There is a cost to forgiveness that should not be ignored.

Did John’s baptism of repentance result in the *actual* forgiveness of sins? Carter has argued that John’s baptism was inadequate and thus did not result in the forgiveness of sins (cf. Acts 19:1-7).<sup>25</sup> It did not require faith in Jesus. Here I dissent from Carter as I see no reason to rule out actual forgiveness, especially in light of our earlier discussion of Luke 1:76-77 and the explicit association of John’s baptism with the forgiveness of sins. If John’s baptism did not result in forgiveness, why mention it at all?

24. See Jennifer Wright Knust, “Jesus’ Conditional Forgiveness,” in *Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian*, eds. David Konstan and Charles L. Griswold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 176-94.

25. Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 3111-317.

We may assume that the Yahweh of the Old Testament rather than Luke’s Jesus is the presumed agent of the forgiveness proclaimed by John.

In light of this discussion we will focus on two questions in relation to this passage. What is the relationship between (1) baptism and repentance, and (2) the relationship between the baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins?

### *The relationship between baptism and repentance*

In John’s proclamation the accusative *baptisma* ‘baptism’, an immersive ritual washing, is qualified by the genitive *metanoias* ‘repentance’ (lit. ‘a change of mind’).<sup>26</sup> The relationship between a qualifying genitive noun (i.e., ‘of repentance’) and its head noun (i.e., ‘baptism’) is often ambiguous when the head noun contains a verbal idea (‘to baptize’).<sup>27</sup> To appreciate this ambiguity consider the English phrase ‘love of God’ (‘of God’ being the equivalent to a Greek genitive modifier). Does this phrase denote the love that God might direct towards someone else (i.e., God’s personal love for others) or does it denote, for example, our love for him. The English phrase can denote both. This same ambiguity is found in equivalent Greek constructions.

In response to this ambiguity, most scholars affirm that the phrase ‘baptism of repentance’ most likely refers to a baptism that derives from, in some sense, the act of repentance, a ‘repentance-baptism’ in which

26. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Anchor Bible: New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 459.

27. This is particularly the case when the head noun contains a verbal idea, in this case, the act of baptising.

baptism is an expression of repentance.<sup>28</sup> The baptism belongs to or in some sense flows from the act of repentance. John's audience repented first and then demonstrated their repentance through baptism. Some have nuanced this position by emphasizing repentance as an inward change and baptism as an outward demonstration of this change.<sup>29</sup> Such outward expressions were encouraged by John when he exhorted the crowds to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8). Finally, scholars also recognize the possibility that the phrase 'baptism of repentance' may also mean, although less likely, that John's baptism was intended to lead to repentance rather than an expression of repentance.<sup>30</sup> It is maybe a little less clear how the act of baptism would lead to repentance, but such a possibility cannot be excluded grammatically.

Important for our discussion is the idea that the forgiveness of sins is closely related to repentance and that this repentance is to be demonstrated publicly through baptism. Interpersonal moral wrongs need public recognition. In a family setting other public expressions of repentance than baptism will be required. Such public expression of sorrow ensures the "recognition that what took place was wrong and should never have happened."<sup>31</sup> Forgiveness is thus distinguished from the condoning of sin. Forgiveness is not turning a blind eye in order to 'move on'. The requirement of repentance for forgiveness to take place ensures that sin is not ignored, excused or justified. The Gospel does not directly address how we should

respond to perpetrators who have not or who refuse to repent.

### *The baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins*

Our second question relates to the relationship between the baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Two interpretations are possible for the prepositional phrase *eis aphasis hamartiōn* 'to/for the forgiveness of sin'.<sup>32</sup> First, repentance, deemed to be the public demonstration of an inner subjective feeling of guilt, is undertaken for the *purpose* of securing the forgiveness of sins.<sup>33</sup> In this case, respondents repent *in order* to have their sins forgiven. Repentance is the precondition necessary to achieve forgiveness. Second, repentance *results* in the forgiveness of sins. When you repent, the forgiveness of sins naturally results. The difference between these two interpretations is one of intention. The *purpose* interpretation assumes that repentance is undertaken with a clear intent to achieve a renewed status of forgiveness. I repent for the purposes of securing forgiveness. Forgiveness is my goal. The *results* interpretation assumes that repentance is undertaken for its own sake, somewhat independent of our desire to achieve forgiveness. Pastorally, it is important to maintain both readings in that it affirms the possibility of different motives for repentance. Not everyone repents for entirely pure motives.

The importance of the relationship between repentance and forgiveness in Luke's

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28. E.g., Plummer, *Luke*, 86; Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 459-60; Marshall, *Luke*, 136.

29. Plummer, *Luke*, 86; Marshall, *Luke*.

30. Cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 135.

31. Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 9.

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32. The phrase *aphesis hamartiōn* 'forgiveness of sin' is not found in the LXX but nevertheless the verb *aphienai* is used with *hamartia* (e.g., Num. 14:19; Ps 25:18). Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 459.

33. Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 459; Marshall, *Luke*. On the relationship between repentance and the sacrificial system, see Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 67-91.

thinking is demonstrated by its close association elsewhere in the Gospel. In Luke 17:3-4, the disciples are instructed that they *must* forgive a person who repents, even if the person in question sins against them seven times a day. Forgiveness is not optional when repentance is present. Forgiveness is obligated to those who repent. In 24:47, “repentance and forgiveness of sins [...] in his name” is the message to be proclaimed to all nations. It is a core element of the post-resurrection proclamation of Jesus’s followers. Similarly, in Acts we find this close association: “Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven (*eis aphesin tōn hamartiōn hymōn*); and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). In this particular case, discussion focuses on whether *eis aphesin* ‘for forgiveness’ should be read in terms of *purpose* (“Repent, and be baptized [...] *in order that* your sins may be forgiven”), *results* (“Repent, and be baptized [...] *so that* your sins may be forgiven), or *causal* (“Repent, and be baptized [...] *because of* the forgiveness of your sins). This may seem a somewhat esoteric discussion for many readers—arguing over the meaning of a single Greek preposition—*eis*. However, it is important in that it reinforces the importance of the nuanced relationship between repentance and forgiveness.

In these texts, forgiveness is conditional on the demonstration of sorrow. The sinner needs to repent. Forgiveness is also, however, obligated upon the victim when such repentance is present. This counters the idea that forgiveness should only be extended once the victim has achieved a certain emotional or psychological state. This can be especially hard in a family setting where deep

bonds of love may have been broken or betrayed. If the perpetrator repents, Jesus requires us to forgive the sin regardless of any emotions we hold towards the perpetrator.

### 3. Jesus has the authority to forgive sins (Luke 5:17-26)

In the Old Testament it is Yahweh alone who dispenses forgiveness. We may presume that it was Yahweh who forgave those who repented in response to the preaching of John the Baptist. In Luke, however, Jesus also dispenses forgiveness in a manner that clearly shocked his audiences (cf. Luke 5:21; 7:49). We will focus on one of these instances—Luke’s account of the healing of the paralytic which largely reflects one of his primary sources, the Gospel of Mark.<sup>34</sup> We will first focus on Mark’s account and then return to that of Luke.

Mark starts his account by situating Jesus in his hometown of Capernaum, teaching such large crowds that there was no spare room either in his house or outside the door (Mark 2:1-2). Into this setting some people bring to Jesus a paralytic lying on a mat. Because of the crowds, they were forced to remove the roof above Jesus and let the paralytic down before Jesus. Upon seeing *their* faith, Jesus declared to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5; Luke 5:20). The emphasis on *their* faith suggests that the paralytic functions less as an individual in the sense that a western reader understands individual identity and more as a representative of his community,

34. On Markan priority, see Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Joseph B. Tyson, and William O. Walker, eds., *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal* (Macon: Mercer, 1985); Mark S. Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem*.

a community that demonstrates their faith in Jesus through the act of bringing the paralytic to him. The forgiveness on offer is particularised in the paralytic but is really an expression of divine forgiveness of the wider community. We also learn that faith, in addition to repentance, prompts a response of forgiveness (cf. Luke 7:50).

### *Who is doing the forgiving? God or Jesus?*

In Jesus's declaration of forgiveness, it is somewhat unclear as to who is doing the forgiving. Mark's Jesus uses the verb 'to forgive' in its present passive form, *aphientai sou hai hamartiai*, lit. "your sins are (being) forgiven".<sup>35</sup> Luke changes Mark's present tense *aphientai* to a perfect tense, *apheōntai*, 'your sins are forgiven' (Luke 5:20; cf. 7:48), emphasising the completed nature of the forgiveness on offer.<sup>36</sup> This use of the passive voice ("your sins *are being forgiven*") has been interpreted by some scholars as a divine passive, indicating that it is God who has removed the paralytic's sins.<sup>37</sup> Jesus did not, after all, directly state 'I forgive your sins'.

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35. So too Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 179. Davies and Allison suggest that the equivalent in Matthew is an 'aoristic present', translated 'are this moment forgiven.' W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Commentary on Matthew 8-18* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 89.

36. A Greek verb in the perfect tense is frequently translated with an English present tense equivalent if the author's emphasis is judged to be on the continuing effects of the action (intensive use). In a number of manuscripts Matthew also makes this change (αφρωνται, C, K, L, N, W, Δ, Θ; ἀφριενται, Ξ, B, W).

37. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-7: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (27-27A.; AB: New York: Doubleday, 1999), 216; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia 62: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 185.

If this is the case, then Jesus's declaration would be the equivalent, according to Joel Marcus, of an Old Testament priest enabling through the sacrificial system the forgiveness of sinners and then declaring this change of status to petitioners (this assumes a declaration is implied in Lev. 4:26, 31).<sup>38</sup> In such instances humans function as spokespersons for God, declaring his forgiveness.<sup>39</sup> Against this idea is the Jewish tradition that the seven hundred priests and officials worked in total silence when offering sacrifices in the Temple (*EpArist.* 95; cf. 92).<sup>40</sup> They thus did not declare forgiveness upon the confessor. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, prophets declare on behalf of God the forgiveness of sins (cf. 2 Sam. 12:13; Isa. 33:24; 40:2).<sup>41</sup> This is not, however, how the scribes understand Jesus's words.

### *Only God can forgive!*

The scribes understand Jesus to be more than a spokesperson for God—declaring God's forgiveness of the paralytic. They consider him to be committing blasphemy

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38. Marcus, *Mark 1-7*, 216.

39. Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss, «Mark,» in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised: Matthew-Mark*, eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010) (725).

40. For discussion, see Tobias Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission* (SNTSMS 150: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 134-35.

41. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 142-64. This reading of 2 Sam. 12:13 has been disputed by Tobias Hägerland who suggests that David is not declared forgiven but rather that his sin is transferred onto his son (pp. 160-161). Hägerland also argues that Jesus is an angelomorphic Messiah who declares the forgiveness of sins and that the dialogue relating to blasphemy in Mark 2:6-10 is fictitious (pp. 176, 236).



itself (“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Mark 2:7; cf. Luke 5:21).<sup>42</sup> Blasphemy, though rarely defined out of fear of blaspheming God in the process, was understood in Judaism to include a range of offenses such as reviling God,<sup>43</sup> cursing God,<sup>44</sup> speaking with contempt toward God,<sup>45</sup> reproving God with words,<sup>46</sup> and uttering the name of Yahweh.<sup>47</sup> Blasphemy could also be directed towards God’s people (Sisera in Judg. 4:3 and *NumR* 10:2; Goliath in 1 Sam. 17 and Josephus, *Ant.* 6.183), the Temple and its objects (Belshazzar in Dan. 3:29 and Josephus, *Ant.* 10.233, 242; Titus in *b. Giṭ.* 56).<sup>48</sup> The scribes interpret Jesus’s words as an act of self-exaltation, a challenge against God.

The reason for the scribe’s accusation is expressed in their words, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7; cf. Luke 5:21). They have solid scriptural evidence on their side for this theological position. In the Old Testament, according to Richard Hays, the “prerogative to forgive sins belongs to God alone” since sin is “offense

against God”.<sup>49</sup> Passages that come to mind include the great declaration of the name of Yahweh, as the one who forgives sins in Exod. 34:6-7:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

While this declaration affirms that there may be occasions when God will not clear the guilty, it also includes an affirmation of his desire to forgive all forms of sin. The scribes may also, according to Hays, have recalled other passages such as Isa. 43:35, “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”<sup>50</sup> Forgiveness is clearly a divine prerogative (cf. Ps 130:4). The scribes were clear that Jesus was doing far more than declaring God’s forgiveness but rather was himself authorizing divine forgiveness.

In response to what Hays describes as the scribe’s “thoroughly understandable objection”, Jesus “perceived in his spirit” their questionings and challenged them as to which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’ (Mark 2:9; cf. Luke 5:23)?<sup>51</sup> It is clear to readers that the easier of the two statements *to say* is ‘Your sins are forgiven’ in that it is very difficult to verify the veracity of such

42. So too Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, 89; Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 40.

43. Cf. MT: piel of *qālal*; LXX: *kakologeō*; Exod. 22:27, 28; MT: piel of *gāḏap*; LXX: *blasphēmō*; 2 Kgs 19:6, 22.

44. Cf. MT: *nāqab*, piel of *qālal*; LXX: *kataraomai*; Lev. 24:11, 14.

45. Cf. MT: *n<sup>e</sup>’āsā*; LXX: *blasphēmia*; Ezek. 35:12.

46. Cf. MT: Hiph of *yāqab*; LXX: *blasphēmō*; 2 Kgs 19:4.

47. Cf. *nōqēḥ šēm-yhwh*, ‘names the Name’, Lev. 24:16. For extended discussion on blasphemy in Judaism contemporary to early Christianity, see Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61-64* (WUNT 2/106: Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 30-112.

48. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, 111.

49. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (ESG) (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016),

65. So also, Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 17-66.

50. Hays, *ESG*, 65.

51. Hays, *ESG*, 65.



a claim.<sup>52</sup> Jesus, however, demonstrates his authority to forgive sins by proving his ability *to say* and *to verify* the command to stand and walk (2:10). Whether this authority is an intrinsic or a delegated authority is not clear from the account itself. In the context of the whole Gospel, however, the reader is aware that Jesus has already been identified as *Kyrios* ‘Lord’ in Mark 1:3, an epithet applied to Yahweh in the Old Testament (e.g., LXX Exod. 3:4, 15; Isa. 40:3). This would suggest that such authority is of an intrinsic nature.<sup>53</sup>

The extension of the divine prerogative to forgive sins to Jesus is an astonishing move in the context of first-century Judaism. God’s forgiveness is Jesus’s forgiveness. Jesus’s forgiveness is God’s forgiveness. By inviting Jesus into our families, we are inviting one into our midst who mediates forgiveness and changes relationships.

*Why the forgiveness of sin over physical healing?*

Let us return to Jesus’s opening declaration in the story and ask a very basic question; why did Jesus offer forgiveness of sins to the paralytic instead of immediately healing him of his paralysis (Matt. 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20)?<sup>54</sup> Here is a suggestion as to why this was the case. Each of the

three synoptic gospels present a sequence of miracles leading up to the healing of the paralytic:

*Gospel of Mark*

Demoniac (Mark 1:21-28)

Simon’s mother-in law (Mark 1:29-31)

“All who were sick or possessed with demons” (Mark 1:32)

Leper (Mark 1:40-45)

*Paralytic* (Mark 2:1-12)

*Gospel of Matthew*

Leper (Matt. 8:1-4)

Centurion’s servant (Matt. 8:5-13)

Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14-15)

Those possessed with demons and the sick (Matt. 8:16-17)

Gadarene Demoniacs (Matt. 8:28-34)

*Paralytic* (Matt. 9:1-8)

*Gospel of Luke*

Demoniac (Luke 4:31-37)

Simon’s mother-in law (Luke 4:38-39)

Any who were sick and who had various diseases (Luke 4:40)

Demoniacs (Luke 4:41)

Leper (Luke 5:12-16)

*Paralytic* (Luke 5:17-26)

The effect of these sequences is to establish in the respective reader’s understanding the expectation that when someone approaches Jesus with a physical problem, whether it be, for example, leprosy or blindness, he will immediately address the problem. He heals the leper of his leprosy and Peter’s mother-in-law of her fever, etc, etc. The reader thus expects that with the introduction of a paralytic, Jesus will promptly bestow upon him the ability to walk.<sup>55</sup>

52. So too Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (Hermeneia 61B; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 28.

53. Hays, *ESG*, 66. For a summary of the divine acts that Jesus performs in Luke, see Heinrichs-Tarassenkova, *Luke’s Christology*, 171.

54. Surprisingly, many commentators do not directly address this question. See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 583; Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 220-24; Marcus, *Mark 1-7*, 216; Bovon, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 178; Collins, *Mark*, 185.

55. Bovon states that “The readers expect a miracle and hear a saying about forgiveness.” Bovon, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 182.

Instead, breaking expectations, the paralytic has his sins forgiven. Why so?

None of the Evangelists explicitly link the sins of the paralytic with his physical state. An implicit relationship may be inferred, however, if we understand his paralysis as being more than purely a physical problem. We find the principle in the Old Testament that you become like that which you worship, and so, if you worship idols who cannot speak, hear, see, or walk, you will end up dumb, deaf, blind and paralyzed (Ps 115:3-8; 135:15-18). If we read the passage in light of this principle, then the paralytic is symptomatic of Israel's idolatrous state. Forgiveness is extended as a result of the faith of his companions, a recognition that they have turned away from idolatry and placed their trust in Jesus. The effect of shifting the issue from paralysis to sin is to emphasise the importance of forgiveness over the need for physical healing.<sup>56</sup> From Jesus's perspective, forgiveness was the primary need of the paralytic (and of the reader?). I suspect that for most Christians, the healing of our daily physical niggles and ailments is in practical terms more important than any felt need for God's forgiveness. This account challenges such a mindset.

#### **4. God forgives us as long as we forgive others (Luke 6:37; 11:4)**

Another important lesson we learn in Luke is that forgiveness is highly conditional, a somewhat challenging teaching for those whose understanding of forgiveness is restricted to the concept of unconditional grace.<sup>57</sup> Jesus presents in the sermon on the plain two complementary teachings which

are somewhat a chicken and egg dilemma: first, Luke's readers are to be merciful just as their Father is merciful (Luke 6:36; cf. Matt. 5:48); second, their Heavenly Father's mercy is contingent on them being merciful to others (cf. conditional forgiveness in Luke 6:37-38). In this case he is merciful because they are merciful! We are to be merciful because he is merciful, and he is merciful because we are merciful.

Let us consider the first point in more detail—the call to imitate divine mercy. According to Luke 6:27-31, we are to set aside the demands of justice in our treatment of others:

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:27-31)

The norms of justice would suggest that we should treat others in the same way that we are treated. When others hate us, we should hate them. When they curse us, we curse them. This is the eye-for-an-eye principle (cf. Exod. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:19-21). In contrast, Jesus asks us to lay aside the demands for justice and instead return love for hate, blessings for curses, and prayer for

56. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 30.

57. Cf. Rom. 3:24; 4:16; 5:2, 15, 17, 20-21; 6:14-15; 11:5-6; 12:6; Gal. 1:6, 15; 2:9, 21; 5:4. See also the important study of Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*.

those who abuse us.<sup>58</sup> His followers are to practice unbounded generosity to others, laying aside their right to treat others as they deserve.<sup>59</sup> The theological justification for this stance is explained in vv. 32-36, which climaxes with the theocentric statement, “because their Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).<sup>60</sup> When in abusive situations they are to imitate their Heavenly Father rather than the abuser and extend mercy because their Father is merciful.

The second teaching, which qualifies the first, is that when it comes to our treatment of others, God forgives us *if* we forgive others, he is merciful to us *if* we are merciful to others. Justice will be strictly enforced in the sense that God will treat us as we treat others:

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:37-38)

How we treat others is how we will be treated by God: “Forgive, and you will be

forgiven, [...] for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:37, 38; cf. Matt. 7:1; Mark 4:24). By ‘measure’, Jesus is referring to the use of a measuring jar.<sup>61</sup> The principle held that if you borrowed a certain amount of wheat using a particular jar to measure the quantity borrowed, you were expected to use the same jar when repaying the lender. Thus, if we have extended a measure to others that includes forgiveness and generosity, that same measure will be extended to us. Conversely, if we have extended a measure that focuses on judgment and justice, that same measure will be extended to us. This opens up the potentially terrifying prospect that we determine the nature of our own eschatological judgment. To withhold forgiveness from someone else will result in God withholding forgiveness from us.<sup>62</sup> To insist on justice in our dealings with others will result in justice being the criteria against which we are judged by God. To extend forgiveness to others contributes to God extending forgiveness to us. The good news is that when we extend a measure of generosity to others, God will apply an abundantly generous measure to us on the day of judgment.<sup>63</sup>

Jesus’s teaching on the conditional nature of forgiveness in Luke 6:38 was of such import for Luke that he included it in his abbreviated version of the Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4; cf. Matt. 6:12). Matthew makes the conditional nature of forgiveness more explicit: “For if you forgive others their trespasses,

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58. Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 235. For the Lukan Jesus as an advocate of nonviolence, see Josephine Massyngberde Ford, *My Enemy Is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in Luke* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

59. Jesus’s command to love our enemies is to be contrasted, according to François Bovon, with first-century Judaism’s more limited call to treat them with generosity and to perform loving deeds on their behalf (cf. Prov. 25:21). Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 234. Cf. Justin, *Apol.* 1.15.9-10.

60. Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 239.

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61. Marshall, *Luke*, 266.

62. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 63.

63. Marshall, *Luke*, 266-67. We may also note that divine forgiveness is determined by our own attitudes towards others rather than by Jesus’s death on cross, a theological stance typical of Luke.

your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). Divine forgiveness is dependent upon human forgiveness. In neither of these passages do victims receive restitution from their transgressors.<sup>64</sup> The justice of retribution is set aside. In its place they receive forgiveness for their own transgressions.

So we return to our chicken and egg dilemma. On the one hand, we are to be merciful *because* our Father is merciful. On the other hand, he is merciful (the text states ‘forgiving’) *because* we are merciful to others. This creative tension provides us with two motivations for being merciful; firstly, and this is maybe the more worthy of the two motivations, out of a desire to honor and imitate our merciful Father and secondly, out of a desire for self-preservation. Pastoral flexibility seems to be the order of the day. When we transgress others, we are to accept their forgiveness even if it is offered purely out of a desire for self-preservation.

##### **5. The expression of gratitude for forgiveness vindicates God (Luke 7:36-50)**

Expressing gratitude for the forgiveness of sins plays a vital role in the public vindication of God’s character. In Luke 7:36, a Pharisee, whose name is later revealed to be Simon (7:40), invites Jesus to eat with him. Luke stresses the importance of Simon’s identity as a Pharisee through four references in the opening verses of the account (“the Pharisee”, v. 36; “the Pharisee’s house”, vv. 36, 37; “the Pharisee”, v. 39). Why such a

strong emphasis on his Pharisaic identity?<sup>65</sup> The most likely explanation is that in the preceding narrative Luke-as-narrator condemns the Pharisees in the strongest possible terms: “But by refusing to be baptized by [John the Baptist], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:30).<sup>66</sup> It is against this background that we should interpret the events of 7:36-50. Simon *the Pharisee* is part of a group who have rejected John’s “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). They have refused to repent. As a result, we may infer that their sins have not been forgiven. Instead they slander Jesus as a “glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34). Are we to conclude that in inviting Jesus to eat, the Pharisee was a ‘friend’ of Jesus and, although he does not admit it, a sinner in need of forgiveness (cf. 11:37)? It is one such sinner, a friend of Jesus, who intrudes into the Pharisee’s meal with him.

Luke does not give her name but instead identifies her as “a woman in the city, who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37). Thematic echoes to the preceding account suggest that we are to take the Pharisee and the sinner as representatives of the Pharisees and sinners

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64. Marshall, *Luke*, 461.

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65. There is little reason to take Luke’s account as a polemic against *Christian* Pharisees, as argued by Bouwman. G. Bouwman, “La pécheresse hospitalière (Lc 7:36-50),” *ETHL* 45.1 (1969), 172-79 (176).

66. John J. Kilgallen, “John the Baptist, the Sinful Woman and the Pharisee,” *JBL* 104.4 (1985), 675-79 (677).

of 7:30 and 7:34.<sup>67</sup> In the verse immediately preceding the account in question, Jesus states that “wisdom is vindicated by all her children” (7:35). The sinful woman should probably be viewed as one of wisdom’s ‘children’ and her expression of gratitude as an act of public vindication of Jesus whose status was hotly disputed. It may also be the case that Luke intends us to identify the sinful woman with those women whom Luke identifies as having been “cured of evil spirits and infirmities” by Jesus (8:2).

Upon entering the Pharisee’s home, it being normal practice for homes to be open to uninvited guests, the woman is overcome with gratitude and, breaking all social conventions, weeps and bathes Jesus’s feet with her tears and dries them with her hair (7:38).<sup>68</sup> The Pharisee’s response is to say to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner” (7:39). Demonstrating his prophetic ability to read the Pharisee’s heart (cf. 5:22; 6:8), Jesus responds by sharing with Simon a parable that is devoid of any personal details, thereby enhancing the reader’s ability to read themselves into the account:<sup>69</sup>

“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled (*echarisato*)

the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him (*agapēsei*) more?” (Luke 7:41-42)

Simon correctly responds that the one whose has the most debts cancelled will love most (7:43). As elsewhere in the Gospel, forgiveness is framed in terms of the cancellation of debt. The term for ‘love’ (*agapēsei*) is understood by a number of commentators as denoting gratitude on the basis that there was no specific term in Hebrew or Aramaic for ‘to show gratitude’.<sup>70</sup> Instead, the term ‘to love’ was used to convey this sense. Thus, gratitude is proportional to the amount of debt cancelled.<sup>71</sup> Jesus then contrasts the welcome Simon extended with the actions of the woman (lack of water for his feet/the woman’s tears; no kissing/constant kissing; no anointing/anointing, 7:44-46). In context, these actions may be taken as the public vindication of wisdom, here embodied in Jesus.<sup>72</sup>

This leads to another affirmation of the link between forgiveness and gratitude: “Her sins which were many have been forgiven hence (*oti*) she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves

67. Marshall, *Luke*, 304. Kilgallen suggests the Pharisee rejected John’s baptism of repentance (cf. Luke 7:30) whereas the woman had her sins forgiven through John’s baptism. The problem of this hypothesis is explaining why the woman directs her gratitude towards Jesus rather than John. Kilgallen, “John the Baptist,” 678. See also, David A. S. Ravens, “The Setting of Luke’s Account of the Anointing: Luke 7:2-8:3,” *NTS* 34.2 (1988), 282-92.

68. Bovon, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 294-95.

69. Bovon, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 296.

70. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, rev. ed. ed, 1954), 102; Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 690.

71. Marshall, *Luke*, 306.

72. The link between Jesus and wisdom is more explicit in Matt. 11:2, 19, in which the deeds of wisdom are equated with the deeds of the Messiah.



little” 7:47.<sup>73</sup> Jesus then addresses the woman with these words, “Your sins are forgiven” (*apheōntai*, 7:48). Commentators are split as to whether Jesus’s declaration counts (1) as an affirmation of the fact that her sins were previously forgiven during an encounter not recorded in the Gospel, or (2) a real-time declaration that confirms that confirms forgiveness *because* of her demonstration of great love.<sup>74</sup> The former is the more likely in that it is consistent with Jesus’s other declarations in the dialogue and the statement in 7:50 that it is the woman’s faith rather than her love that has resulted in her forgiveness.<sup>75</sup> As with the healing of the paralytic, Jesus’s declaration of forgiveness prompts questions relating to his identity (5:21; 7:49).

This account reveals the principle that the more we are forgiven by Jesus, the more we will desire to publicly demonstrate our gratitude. The acceptance of divine

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73. This translation renders the *oti* clause as indicating the grounds for determining that her sins are forgiven—we know her sins are forgiven because she has responded with much love. See Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 692; Marshall, *Luke*, 313; Frédéric Manns, “Luc 7:47 et les traditions juives sur Rahab,” *RevScRel* 61.1-2 (1987), 1-16 (5-); Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 297. John Peter Lange and J. J. van Oosterzee, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Luke* (trans. Philip Schaff and Charles C Starbuck; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 123. If we translate *oti* as ‘because’ (as argued by a number of Roman Catholic exegetes), then forgiveness was extended in response to the woman’s love. Manns, “Luc 7:47 et les traditions juives,” 5-6; Léonard Ramarosan, “Le premier, c’est l’amour (Lc 7:47a),” *ScEs* 39.3 (1987), 319-29.

74. Hägerland identifies two interpretations of the woman’s actions—as acts of repentance or acts of love and gratitude. He opts for the later. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 52-53. Cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 306; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 359.

75. Marshall, *Luke*, 306.

forgiveness of our sins has the potential to transform the culture of our families into one in which glory is continuously given to Jesus. Such a culture in which gratitude is expressed and Jesus is glorified is more likely to encourage the regular practice of interpersonal repentance and forgiveness.

## 6. Forgiveness requires us to rebuke those who have committed wrong in ignorance (Luke 12:10; 23:34)

One of the most difficult sayings of Jesus is found in Luke 12:10: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (cf. Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-30).<sup>76</sup> Patristic exegetes understood blasphemy against the Son of Man to refer to pre-baptismal hostility towards Jesus and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as referring to the apostasy of those previously baptized.<sup>77</sup> Augustine characterized blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as impenitence against the Spirit by those who have already received the gift of the salvation.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, most contemporary scholars understand the distinction between blasphemy against the Son of God and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as directly relating to the plot

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76. Many scholars seek to determine Jesus’s actual words, usually with unsatisfying results. For example, John Cochrane O’Neill, “The Unforgivable Sin,” *JSNT* 6.19 (1983), 37-42. On the role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts, see Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, 225-72; Aaron J. Kuecker, *The Spirit and the “Other”: Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 444; London: T&T Clark, 2011).

77. On the multiple explanations of Luke 12:10, see Marshall, *Luke*, 517; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Anchor Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 964.

78. E.g., Augustine, *Serm.* 21.13, 20, 34.



of Luke-Acts.<sup>79</sup> It is this explanation I will develop further.

In Luke, the leaders of Israel reject the Son of Man, murdering him at the hands of the Gentiles. This blasphemous act then becomes the focus of the early chapters of Acts in which the offer of forgiveness, as we would expect according to Luke 12:10, is repeatedly extended to those directly implicated in the murder of Jesus (Acts 5:30-32; cf. 2:38-39; 3:19-21). In narrative terms, forgiveness is made available to those who have blasphemed the Son of Man.<sup>80</sup> The failure, however, of Israel's leaders to accept these offers of forgiveness, delivered by those upon whom the Spirit of God had been poured (Acts 2:4, 17; 4:8, 31), constituted a rejection of the witness of the Holy Spirit that made it impossible for God's promise of the giving of the Holy Spirit to Israel to be enacted (2:33; cf. 2:38-39; 5:32). In this vein, Stephen recounts before the rulers in Jerusalem their repeated rejection of God's plans for Israel (cf. 7:17, 25, 34-35).<sup>81</sup> He concludes with the climactic accusation that they are "forever opposing the Holy Spirit" (7:52). This constitutes

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79. Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 41.5, understands blasphemy against the Son of Man as Jewish hostility towards Jesus undertaken in ignorance, and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as Jewish rejection of the revealed and known will of God expressed through the Holy Spirit. Cf. François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27* (trans. Donald S. Deer; Hermeneia 63B: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2013), 185. In contrast, some scholars understand blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as referring to a sustained opposition to God himself. So too, Thomas W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus, as Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Matthew and St. Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 110; Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 964.

80. Bovon, *Luke 9:51–19:27*, 185.

81. Cf. Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel*, 50-71.

blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, for which, within the narrative of Acts, no offer of forgiveness is extended.

More positively, Peter blasphemes the Son of Man when he denies Jesus prior to his crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62).<sup>82</sup> Later, however, he receives the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an indication, it would seem, that his denial of Jesus had been forgiven (Acts 2:1-4, 14-42). The important principle for our families is that while we are obligated to extend forgiveness when there is repentance (Luke 17:3-4), this is not the case when repentance is absent.

### *Ignorance does not excuse you from repentance*

Central to this explanation is the idea that God will forgive those who act in ignorance of his plans.<sup>83</sup> Jesus pleads on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (*ou gar oidasin ti poiousin*, Luke 23:34).<sup>84</sup> Peter exhorts the 'Israelites' in the opening chapters of Acts

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82. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation; Volume 1: The Gospel according to Luke* (1; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 264-65.

83. On the theme of God's plan in Luke-Acts, I would point you to Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (trans. Geoffrey Buswell; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 151-53; Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, 11-85; Bock, *Theology of Luke and Acts*, 99-148.

84. These words are absent from a number of important witnesses (Ɱ<sup>75</sup> Ɱ<sup>1</sup> B D\* W Θ 070 579 1241 sy<sup>s</sup> sa). They are included in Ɱ\*<sup>2</sup> (A) C D<sup>2</sup> L Ψ 0250 f<sup>1,(13)</sup> 33 Ɱ<sup>l</sup> lat sy<sup>c,p,h</sup>. Cf. Wright Knust, "Jesus' Conditional Forgiveness," 180-81; Carter, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 220. I reject Knust's suggestion that, on the basis her rejection of the accounts of the crucifixion Jesus and stoning of Steven as historically plausible, Jesus's words in Luke 23:34 are included to highlight the complicity of the Jews and a desire that they be punished. Wright Knust, "Jesus' Conditional Forgiveness," 192-93.

to repent for killing the Holy and Righteous One, the Author of life (Acts 3:12-26). As with Jesus on the cross, Peter characterizes their participation in the murder of Jesus as an act undertaken in ignorance of God's plan that he had foretold through the prophets (3:17-18; cf. Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; Acts 7:60; 13:27-28). Later in Acts, Paul informs the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens that "while God has overlooked the times of human ignorance (*chronous tēs agnoias*), now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (17:30). It would seem that actions against God committed in ignorance are overlooked until the perpetrator is informed of God's plan, in this case a fixed day on which the world will be judged. No longer in ignorance of the divine will, a failure to prepare for this day of judgment will result in condemnation.

Ignorance alone will not enable you to avoid punishment. Jesus warns his disciples in Luke 12 to be ever watchful for the unexpected return of the Son of Man by telling them a parable about four types of managerial servants who are put in charge of their master's possessions and slaves: the good servant was found to have taken care of the master's household and was put in charge of all of his possessions (12:43-44; cf. Matt. 24:45-51); the second servant beat the other slaves, got drunk, and was cut in pieces upon his master's return (12:45-46); the third servant knew his master's will, failed to do it, and received a severe beating upon his master's return (12:47); and the fourth slave did not know or perform his master's will and received a light beating upon his master's return (12:48).<sup>85</sup> While ignorance

is taken into account, ultimately it does not excuse a failure to perform the master's will.

In summary, divine forgiveness takes into account the level of understanding of the perpetrator at the time he or she committed the wrong. Their debt is proportional to their level of understanding. The lesson we may apply to our families is that there is an important role for post-hurt education of the perpetrator to enlighten him or her of the moral significance of their actions and the need for repentance. This requires the courage to rebuke and inform, actions typically absent from the practice of therapeutic forgiveness.

## Conclusion

What is clear from our consideration of the theme of forgiveness of sins in the Gospel of Luke is that the Evangelist is far more interested in God's forgiveness of humanity than in interpersonal forgiveness. Divine forgiveness, mediated through Jesus, is not unconditional but comes with strings attached; heartfelt repentance; the public demonstration of sorrow; faith; and the forgiveness of one's fellow man. The effect of receiving such forgiveness is the restoration of the divine-human relationship and the vindication of God through a public demonstration of love and gratitude. Achieving such a status is the primary way to improve family and other interpersonal relationships.

Lukan forgiveness, in contrast with therapeutic forgiveness's preoccupation with the positive transformation of the victim's internal emotional state, involves a costly decision, an act of the will, to set aside the demands of justice and restitution in the knowledge that if we treat others in this manner, God will treat us likewise. It

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85. Cf. Wright Knust, "Jesus' Conditional Forgiveness," 184.

should be undertaken either out of an admirable desire to imitate our Father's mercy or out of a more prosaic interest in self-preservation. It involves the cancelling of sin-debt with minimal attention paid to the emotional roller-coaster ride we may experience when making such a move. The psychological impact on those involved is less important than removing an obstacle to the restoration of relationship.

It is in this context that we—'the convicted', we—'the repentant', we—'the

baptized', we—'the forgiven', we—'the grateful', continually re-read and reapply the words of Jesus within our own family settings:

If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." Luke 17:3-4

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# FORGIVING OUR PARENTS, FORGIVING OURSELVES: HOW CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSED BY THEIR PARENTS CAN FIND RELEASE FROM A LIFE OF TORMENT

*Children who have experience the childhood trauma of sexual abuse are often victimized all over again by well-meaning individuals who try to convince them it was partially their fault and demand they forgive and be reconciled to their perpetrator, often their own parent. Continually living with the weight of an abusive past hinders them from truly enjoying all that life offers.*

In this article we will explore the journey to healing from an abusive past, look at what forgiveness is, and understand how victims of childhood abuse may come to forgive their abusers and move from surviving to thriving.

## Introduction

Lorie<sup>1</sup> Was confused and terrified every time her dad came into her room late at night. He just wanted to keep her company, he said. But if she was supposed to feel comfortable and safe with him, why was she afraid? It all started two years earlier. Her mom and dad seemed to be arguing a lot. Lori would run to her room and shut the door, climb in bed, and put her pillow over her head. She could still hear the shouting, but the muffled sounds put a little dis-

tance between her and her parents. Once the fighting subsided, the silence became even scarier.

Lori remembers the first time her dad crawled in bed with her. Her put his arms around her, drew her close to him, and whispered in her ears that he loved her and was there to take care of her. It was comforting, indeed, at first. But then his gentle touches made her uncomfortable. Her parents had told her to beware of other people who might try to touch her in the private places of her body, but this was no stranger...it was her own dad. She didn't know how to deal with her conflicting emotions or whether she should be angry, or pleased.

Lori's sexual abuse continued until she was a teenager. Now, in her thirties, Lori is married, has two daughters of her own, and often has flashbacks of those horrible nights when her dad molested her. She is terrified

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1. All names have been changed to protect the victims)

that her husband might do the same thing to their daughters, although he has never caused them any harm and loves her, and their daughters, immensely. Her husband has asked her about her family of origin, but all Lori tells him is that she doesn't want to talk about them and does not want to ever see them again. And most definitely, she forbids her dad to see his granddaughters.

Lori has held a deep anger, even hatred, of her dad for many years. His abuse was the reason she left home at a very early age, fleeing for her safety. But all these years later, she still carries the burden from her past and fear for the future of her daughters.

Like Lori, countless victims of abused by their parents live with the weight of their abuse holding them back from being free and thriving in life. Some have become abusers themselves, while others experience deep psychological and spiritual struggles. At the same time, many victims of childhood abuse have learned the value of forgiveness and have lived happy, healthy, successful lives for their own benefit and for the benefit of every relationship they have, particularly their own family.

## Stages of Abuse

In order to help victims of sexual abuse put their experiences into a logical framework, social scientists have described the journey from abuse to healing as stages a victim traverses on the way to becoming a survivor. While this article does not deal with adult rape, it is important to recognize that children who have suffered sexual abuse may also experience similar feelings as those of rape victims.

**1. Shock/Disorganization.** As in the case of Lori, Jack was shocked and scared the moment his elementary school teacher

touched his genitals. Jack could not figure out why such a kind, funny, and gentle man would touch him when his parents had warned him about strangers doing that. He was shaking, a combination of fear and disbelief. When the initial shock wore off, he tried to rationalize and even minimize what had taken place. Perhaps he just imagined it. Or maybe his teacher didn't mean to do it. Or perhaps, he thought, it was over my pants, he didn't put his hand under my pants. When he told his parents, and they called the police, he became disoriented with so many people asking him so many questions. The police took him to the hospital where he had even more people asking him more questions. And when the case came to trial, there were lawyers and judges, and others asking more and more questions. It was confusing, scary, and even embarrassing.

**2. Denial.** After the initial abuse, and the following investigation, Jack continued to second-guess himself. "It wasn't that bad." "Did he really touch me? Or did I just imagine that?" In many cases children are too afraid to say anything or may even be threatened to not tell anyone. Because they have been told so, they come to believe that "no one will believe me," or "no one will understand." Unless these children receive proper care and professional help, they may believe that "I can't live with myself," "I can't handle this," or have the mistaken idea that "It will go away if I don't think about it."

**3. Guilt and Shame.** Often, victims who talk about their sexual abuse are made to feel that what happened was their fault, not the abuser's. Some people, children and adults, may try to convince them that they "should," or "shouldn't" have done something to prevent the abuse from happening

or they should have defended themselves while the abuse was taking place. As a result, often survivors of sexual trauma internalize those messages and feel guilt and shame. They replay in their minds the things they could have or should have done to escape the trauma, even if as defenseless children there was nothing they could have done. As Camila Williams (2018) states, “They may feel guilty for having not stopped the abuse and ashamed for having been a victim of it.”

**4. Anger and Depression.** Jenny was angry at her father for abusing her, and at her mother for not believing her or protecting her. She was angry at not having control over the situation, but also angry at the system, and angry at God. But since she felt she should have done something to prevent the abuse or to stop it from happening, her anger turned to herself. Self-blame and anger are, in fact, very common among children victims of sexual abuse. Such was the case with Paquito. His mom worked the night shift as a nurse in the community hospital, so she left Paquito in the care of her sister. As Paquito tells, “My aunt was always very loving, playful, and funny. At first, I had a great time with her, she would let me have cake and ice cream, and watch tv, and then we would play games and wrestle. But then the wrestling became less play and more touch. She assured me it was normal for me to feel ‘funny,’ but that I should not tell anyone, especially my mom, about it. Then, one night, she put her hand inside my pajamas. I wanted to run away, but where? I should have screamed, but I was scared. What she did to me night after night still gives me nightmares. I am so weak and worthless.”

Victims of sexual assault have this overwhelming feeling of shame and blame

themselves for the trauma they experienced. They convince themselves that, “I asked for it somehow.” And because they didn’t do anything to prevent it or stop it, they come to accept for themselves the false narrative that “I’ll never feel better again,” and for many the only possible solution is, “I wish I were dead.”

**5. Fear and Anxiety.** The place where children should find safety and security has become their worst nightmare. If they can’t feel safe at home, with those who are supposed to protect them, where can they be safe? They think to themselves, “Will I ever have a healthy relationship again?” “Will I ever be able to trust again?” They feel vulnerable, and very often experience nightmares or night terrors, and flashbacks.

**6. Grief and Mourning.** While grieving can be painful, it can also be very therapeutic. As Williams (2018) explains, “There may be many things to grieve: loss of innocence; loss of childhood; loss of feeling safe; grief over mistrusting others and always feeling like something is ‘too good to be true’; grief over loss of time (for school, relationships, jobs, or time spent self-medicating and in depression); and grief over ‘what could have been.’” With the help of a competent professional, the child can grieve what they lost while looking for a better future and enjoying what can be.

**7. Acceptance of Self and Forgiveness.** When the child, or the person, understand that they were not at fault for what was done to them, that they are not responsible for not being able to prevent or stop the abuse, and that they are not “damaged goods,” they can turn their attention to dealing with the perpetrators of their abuse. Obviously, the abusing actions of the perpetrators may have been dealt with by the

authorities, but the victim himself/herself needs to come to terms with those who caused them so much harm. Here's where forgiveness comes into play.

First, the victim needs to accept that they are not responsible and are not to blame for the abuse perpetrated against them. A person in power took full advantage of the younger, smaller child and victimized them against their will. The adults bear all the responsibility, the child does not.

Second, the survivor of the abuse needs to forgive themselves. What should they forgive themselves for if they were not guilty of any offense or of causing the offense? That is precisely the point. They need to stop blaming themselves, which is in itself, an act of forgiveness.

Third, the abused victim needs to forgive their abuser. That does not excuse or exonerate the abuser but rather releases the victim from any negative feelings they may have toward the abuser. As long as the victim holds negative feelings toward the abuser, they will remain emotionally imprisoned and revictimized by the abuser. As Lewis Smedes (n.d.) declared, "The only way to heal the pain which will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiveness heals the memory's vision. ... You set a prisoner free, but you discover the real prisoner was yourself."

Once the victim learns to accept what happened as not being their responsibility, and detach their negative emotions from the abuser, they can begin to trust themselves and their feelings and work on other aspects of their life. Forgiveness helps the victim to stop blaming themselves and seeing themselves as worthless, vulnerable, and helpless and instead, see themselves as survivors, stronger, and healthier. The abuse will never

change, it is part of their past. But the past does not need to hold them back. As someone said, instead of being an open wound, the abuse will become a scar. It is not a festering infection, but a sealed reminder that the disease is no longer there. Forgiveness keeps the abuse in the past so that it does not negatively impact the future.

One technique that has proved to be helpful for victims of abuse who wish to forgive their abuser is to write a letter to them expressing all the emotions they feel, making them understand that there is no excuse for what they did, and confronting them with the abuse they perpetrated. However, they are not to send the letter. The fact is that the letter is not for the benefit of the abuser, nor to try to change them or make them recognize or accept what they did, or even to get them to apologize for the abuse. The letter is to benefit the victim as it releases their pent-up emotions toward their abuser which keeps them attached to them. The letter is a sort of official declaration of freedom from their abuser. The abused may also write a letter to him/herself forgiving themselves for what they did or did not do to try and survive the abuse. Perhaps their life of abuse led them to abuse drugs or alcohol, or they became sexually involved with many people, or did other things to harm him/herself. Such actions did not help them feel better about themselves and perhaps actually caused the opposite reaction. Forgiving themselves for self-harm is also part of the healing process.

The bottom line is that forgiveness helps the abused to accept themselves and begin a new, better chapter of their life. It is the stage in life when they can tell themselves, "It wasn't my fault," "I didn't choose to be abused," "I didn't choose to have

parents/uncles/aunts/grandparents/siblings who abused me,” “It’s okay if there are moments when I feel angry, but I can channel my anger in positive ways to help me have a better life and perhaps to help others.” Acceptance and forgiveness also help the survivor turn toward the more positive aspects of their life. They can tell themselves, and others, “My own efforts kept me alive,” “I have more control of my own life,” “I am a survivor!”

### **Is Forgiveness Possible for an Abuse Victim?**

There’s a section of Second Corinthians in which Paul intimates that someone in that church has caused Paul harm. This is how Paul writes it in his letter to the members of that church:

“Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup>so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.” 2 Corinthians 2:5-10 (ESV)

What is relevant to our discussion from Paul’s words is that he found it helpful to him, and to the members of the church at Corinth, to forgive the man who had evidently caused

him, and them, harm. Obviously, we cannot compare whatever abuse Paul received as an adult by another adult to that which a defenseless child receives at the hands of an adult, particularly one that should have been their caretaker and defender. Nevertheless, the principle of forgiveness is still applicable. Paul did not excuse his abuser nor the harm he had caused him or the community, but rather he appealed to their Christian love (“I beg you to reaffirm your love for him”) and ethics (“that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything”), because ultimately, we do it for Christ (vs.10).

To be clear, again, forgiving the abuser does not mean ignoring or excusing what they have done to the victim. As McBride (2011) affirms:

“There is an inner letting go for your own well-being that provides emotional benefits to your mental health. Forgiveness in this way is positive and healing as long as you don’t deny the pain and hurt caused to you and you are able to set appropriate boundaries to stop it in the future. Adult children of narcissistic parents have been unloved, and many have been abused physically, sexually and emotionally. We cannot excuse bad parenting. We must not ignore the basic needs and rights of children. So, the forgiving is letting go of the past internally but only after you work the grief in your recovery.”

We could expand on the many reasons we should forgive, from the Judeo-Christian

perspective. Suffice it to say that God expects it from us in as much as He has forgiven us. We believe that God not only wants us to forgive as a demonstration of our own acceptance of His forgiveness, but also because He knows it is for our spiritual, emotional, and even physical benefit to do so. But apart from our spiritual convictions, as long as we hold negative feelings toward the perpetrator, we are the ones who will suffer the most. As Ann Grizzle (1988) wrote, "But think about who your anger is hurting most: it's *you*, as you wallow in your inner turmoil and bitterness. Forgiveness enables you to become fully freed from your anger so that you can develop as good a relationship as possible with your parents. Then, you will also be free to move forward positively in other relationships."

Even if reconciliation is not possible, the goal of forgiveness is for the victim to be able to let go of their injurious past so they can have the freedom to live a better, healthier future. Wright (1989) uses a well-known game to illustrate what happens when the victim extends forgiveness toward their abuser: "Forgiveness involves letting go. Remember playing tug-of-war as a child? As long as the parties on each end of the rope are tugging, you have a 'war.' But when someone lets go, the war is over. When you forgive your father, you are letting go of your end of the rope. No matter how hard he may tug on the other end, if you have released your end, the war is over for you."

So, to the question, is forgiveness possible for an abuse victim, the answer is that it is not only possible but the best course of action to take. The victim, by choosing to forgive their abuser, takes a step forward toward becoming a survivor and moves

more clearly in the direction of becoming, ultimately, a thriver. But forgiveness is not an event, something that happens in one moment, but rather a process that may take a long time, depending on the person and the type and length of the abuse perpetrated on them. As Stoop and Masteller (1991) explain, "Forgiveness then becomes a process that involves freeing *ourselves* from the emotional effects of what was done to us." (p.167)

We must emphasize that forgiveness is not simply a feeling. Worthington (2003, p.41) explains that there are two types of forgiveness.

**1. Decisional Forgiveness.** Regardless of whether we feel that we have forgiven or not, we make the decision to forgive the other person. We consciously release ourselves from what has kept us imprisoned to them and are releasing them to God and His justice.

**2. Emotional Decision.** This is the type of forgiveness that changes the heart.

For the victim of childhood sexual abuse, they may choose the first type of forgiveness- decisional forgiveness. In other words, understanding that it is for their own benefit to forgive, they make a decision to forgive their abuser regardless of the painful memories or feelings they may harbor toward them. But as time goes on, they may come to the place where they no longer have the paralyzing feelings they once did toward their abuser. They have reached the place where they have emotionally forgiven them and are now fully free to live their life without that anchor to their past holding them back.



## Forgiveness Therapy

For some victims of childhood sexual abuse, the understating of what forgiveness is may be sufficient to get them started on that journey. For others, it may necessary, or at the very least recommended, that they seek forgiveness therapy. As Freedman and Enright (2017, p.3) explain, “Forgiveness Therapy allows women who have been abused to choose a moral response to injustice and deep hurt which is both empowering and effective in decreasing the negative psychological outcomes of emotional abuse as one is validated for their anger and other negative feelings and then helped to move beyond them.”

The point is that a victim of childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, does not have to make the journey toward healing alone. Friends, compassionate church members and leaders, and skilled, trained professional may assist them along the way.

## The Process of Forgiveness

Anastasia Pollock makes an important point when she says that one must be careful not to push the victim of childhood sexual abuse to forgive their abuser. As she states, “it is equally important for others to refrain from pushing someone into forgiving a perpetrator. Even if the intention is coming from a good place, trying to get someone who has been violated to forgive can feel like being victimized all over again. Instead, it is more helpful to validate that the person is entitled to his or her feelings. Being a listening ear instead of trying to fix the issue is much more supportive and healing. The person needs to be able to have a voice and express what he or she is feeling and thinking without the fear of judgment.” Blogger Christina Enevoldsen (2015), a victim

herself, confirms, “I was told that forgiveness was for my benefit, not for my abusers, but it wasn’t for my benefit to be pushed. I needed time to sort through my feelings and then to decide for myself without guilt from outside sources.”

As is the case whenever there is a need to forgive, survivors of childhood trauma or abuse begin the process of forgiveness by making the decision, by choosing to forgive their abuser. Stoop and Masteller (1991) provide a six-step process for forgiveness:

**1. Recognize the injury.** Others, perhaps their own mother, have tried to convince a child that what her father did to her did not really happen. Some have made the victim feel somewhat, if not totally, responsible for the abuse. The victim may have even come to the place where they doubt themselves and feel responsible for what took place. But with the help of a compassionate, skilled therapist they may finally come to the place where they accept that the abuse did take place, that they were the victims, and that they were not responsible for causing it or stopping it. This is a critical step. As long as there is denial there is little hope of healing taking place.

Dr. Dick Tibbits (2006) suggests, “Acknowledging the existence of your painful past and the fact that you can’t change it is a key step toward forgiveness. Forgiveness then goes on to insist that you can most definitely change your memory of the painful event. And, by insisting that you adjust your inaccurate memories, forgiveness gives you the power to get unstuck from your past.”

**2. Identify the emotions involved.** Earlier we stated some of the emotions that abuse victims may experience. It is important that they give each of them a label, that

they become aware of the emotions they are experiencing and learn how to manage them appropriately. At one time or another, or perhaps all at once, they may experience anger, fear, guilt, shame, sadness, or deep grief. Understanding these emotions, and why they are experiencing them, also helps them to own them and to heal from them.

**3. Express your hurt and anger.** Inasmuch as it is safe to do so, the victim can confront their abuser. They can let them know that what they did was wrong and inexcusable, and that they hurt them physically, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually. But they can also let them know that they are not helpless victims anymore and that despite their abuse they have survived and have a better life now. The victim is not obligated to confront their abuser and instead they may wish to write a letter, as we explained earlier, expressing their feelings as if they were facing their abuser. Stoop and Masteller (1991) offer a simple explanation as to why it is important to express their emotions: “If you discovered that there was poison in your belly, it would not be enough just to know it was there, or even to know exactly what kind of poison it was. You would want to get rid of it. That is what the word ‘express’ actually means. It means to ‘press something out,’ like squeezing the juice from a lemon. ‘Expressing’ our destructive emotions is important because it gets them ‘out of the system’ so that they cannot poison us any longer.” (p.173)

For those who want to help victims of childhood abuse, it is important that you stop to listen patiently to their story. As Darlene Ouimet (2012) states, “Victims of child abuse (or any type of abuse) need to be heard before they are instructed to move on or find a way to forgive the perpetrator

of the damage caused to them. People need to be validated and assured that what happened to them was WRONG and that they didn’t deserve it. They need to be told that it was not their fault and that the perpetrator of that abuse is the guilty party and that person is the one who is accountable.”

**4. Set boundaries to protect yourself.** Virginia was in her late twenties or early thirties, married, and with two beautiful little red-haired girls. We met Virginia and her family during a visit to the church where they were attending at the time. Later that year, during the annual camp meeting gatherings for the conference, we met Roy and his wife. They, too, were a delightful couple in their late fifties or perhaps early sixties. Sometime later we learned that Roy was Virginia’s father and that he had sexually abused her as a little girl. It was very difficult for us to comprehend how such a nice, pleasant, grandfatherly-like man could have perpetrated such a heinous violation on his daughter, but it was true. We learned that, while Virginia has contact with her dad, she would not let him see her daughters. It was her way of protecting them from possible abuse by her father. While she had forgiven her dad, and could have a relationship, though distant, from him, she did not want to risk her daughter’s being abused by him. As Lewis Smedes (n.d.) said, “You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything...We don’t have to tolerate what people do just because we forgive them for doing it. Forgiving heals us personally. To tolerate everything only hurts us all in the long run.”

This is a very important point to remember because some well-meaning people, particularly Christians, may suggest to the victim that they need to forgive and

reconcile with their abuser. But, as John Shore (2013) explains, “Forgiving your abuser does not necessitate letting them back into your life. Forgiving your abuser does not, in any way whatsoever, oblige you to have, or continue having, a relationship with them. Period. Forgiving a snake for biting me doesn’t mean I have to again pick up that snake.”

**5. Cancel the debt.** This is the point at which you chose to extend forgiveness to your perpetrator. It may be done in person, via a phone call, or via a letter. As we have said before, so people may choose to write a letter and then bury or burn it as a symbolic representation of being free from their past. In fact, in cases where the abuser has died, this may be the only way to forgive.

**6. Consider the possibility of reconciliation.** This is not a requirement for forgiveness. Reconciliation should take place

only when the victim is safe to make sure no further abuse will be perpetrated on themselves or their loved ones.

**From Victim to Survivor to Thriver**

But victims of abuse don’t have to simply be survivors. The image of surviving emotes the image of someone who fell in the ocean, swam to the shore, and collapsed on the beach. A survivor, yes, but barely. Survivors of abuse can have, and many have had, a very good life, marriage, and family despite what was done to them during their childhood. The goal for the survivor, then, is not to simply make it out alive, but to get to the point where their life is better every day, to be thrivers. The website HAVOCA (Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse) (n.d.) shows the difference in being a victim to surviving the abuse and to eventually make it as a thriver.

| VICTIM   | SURVIVOR   | THRIVER                             |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Doesn't deserve nice things or trying for the "good life." | Struggling for reasons & chance to heal            | Gratitude for everything in life.   |
| Low self- esteem/ shame/unworthy                           | Sees self as wounded & healing                     | Sees self as an overflowing miracle |
| Hyper vigilant   | Using tools to learn to relax                      | Gratitude for new life              |
| Alone  | Seeking help                                       | Oneness                             |
| Feels Selfish  | Deserves to seek help                              | Proud of Healthy Self caring        |
| Damaged  | Naming what happened                               | Was wounded & now healing           |
| Confusion & numbness                                       | Learning to grieve, grieving past aggrieved trauma | Grieving at current losses          |
| Overwhelmed by the past                                    | Naming & grieving what happened                    | Living in the present               |
| Hopeless   | Hopeful  | Faith in self & life                |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Uses outer world to hide from self                       | Stays with emotional pain   | Understands that emotional pain will pass & brings new insights                          |
| Hides their story  | Not afraid to tell their story to safe people                                   | Beyond telling their story, but always aware they have created their own healing with HP |
| Believes everyone else is better, stronger, less damaged | Comes out of hiding to hear others & have compassion for them & eventually self | Lives with an open heart for self & others   |
| Often wounded by unsafe others                           | Learning how to protect self by share, check, share                             | Protects self from unsafe others   |
| Places own needs last                                    | Learning healthy needs (See Healing the Child Within & Gift to Myself)          | Places self first realizing that is the only way to function & eventually help others    |
| Creates one drama after another                          | See patterns  | Creates peace  |
| Believes suffering is the human condition                | Feeling some relief, knows they need to continue in recovery                    | Finds joy in peace   |
| Serious all the time                                     | Beginning to laugh  | Seeing the humor in life   |
| Uses inappropriate humor, including teasing              | Feels associated painful feelings instead                                       | Uses healthy humor   |
| Uncomfortable, numb, or angry around toxic people        | Increasing awareness of pain & dynamics   | Healthy boundaries around toxic people, incl. relatives                                  |
| Lives in the past  | Aware of patterns   | Lives in the Now   |
| Angry at religion  | Understanding the difference between religion & personal spirituality           | Enjoys personal relationship with the God of their understanding                         |
| Suspicious of therapists— projects                       | Sees therapist as a guide during projections                                    | Sees reality as their projection & owns it   |
| Needs people & chemicals to believe they are all right   | Glimpses of self-acceptance & fun without others                                | Feels authentic & connected, Whole   |
| “Depression”   | Movement of feelings  | Aliveness  |

Victims of childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, have a lifetime of pain unlike those who may experience abuse as adults. But their abuse does not have to mark them or limit them for life. Those who have accepted the past, without excusing it, denying it, or turning a blind eye to

it, but who have rather confronted it and taken steps to prevent it from happening again and to release themselves from the emotional attachment to their abuse have managed to thrive and gone on to have fruitful, successful, happy lives.

## Additional Resources

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# THE INFLUENCE OF FORGIVENESS ON HEALTH AND HEALING

*As human beings, all of us experience some form of conflict, injustice, or the feeling of being wronged in our relationships. This is particularly true in romantic relationships and among family members. Often, these situations lead people to either choose to forgive the offender or to withhold forgiveness, holding on to bitterness. As it turns out, this choice can have a significant lasting impact on one's health and wellbeing. Researchers have studied forgiveness in the last decades and results revealed strong evidence for the positive influence of forgiveness on physical, mental and social health. This presentation discusses various ways forgiveness can impact one's health and bring transformational healing to individuals, families and communities.*

## **Introduction**

Melissa de Paiva was ten years old when an intruder entered her parent's home on December 23, 2003 in Palau, killing her mom, dad and brother violently. Justin, the intruder, was a construction worker who knew this Brazilian missionary family. He took Melissa, tied her up, and told her she now belonged to him. He then took her to his house and in the next evening, afraid of being caught, relocated her to a remote place. He proceeded to strangle her leaving her for dead in the woods (Hamel, 2019). I am glad to say the story does not end there.

In a miraculous way, Melissa survived and eventually was reunited with her loving grandparents who gave her support back in the United States. She grew up to be a beautiful young woman, a healthy mission-driven nurse.

In many cases, people who experience such traumatic events often have emotional scars, hatred, and bitterness towards their offender. These scars can lead to anger,

which can result in lasting negative physical and mental health outcomes (Davis, Green, Reid, Moloney, & Burnette, 2015). But in the case of Melissa, she did not hold grievances towards Justin. In 2012, sharing about her experience Melissa stated that God helped her forgive (Paiva, 2012). Melissa chose forgiveness and this choice, the emotional support of loved ones, her deep faith, and a sense of God's purpose instilled in her early in life, all played a role in her health, healing, and positive outlook as an adult. She wrote (Paiva, 2012):

*Looking back I can see that my parents and brother accomplished much more in death than in life, and many blessings came out of what seemed to be the end of everything. I learned to be a much stronger person, and my relationship with the Lord flourished.*

## **Effects of Traumatic Stress and Unhealthy Relationships on Health Outcomes**

Decades of research link traumatic stress experiences, whether in early childhood or later in life, with negative outcomes for physical and mental health of individuals, families and communities.

### **Physical Health Impact**

Science documents that exposure to physical, sexual, or emotional violence, or the ongoing stress related to abuse, is linked to many health problems. For instance, an important group of studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente in the United States demonstrated a link between adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and several negative physical health outcomes later in adulthood (Felitti, et al., 1998). These traumatic childhood experiences included “verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, as well as family dysfunction” such as witnessing adult domestic violence (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

These early traumatic experiences have been associated with an increased risk for physical health problems like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, unregulated pro-inflammatory markers, cancer, obesity, and premature mortality (Goodwin & Stein, 2004). There seems to be an ongoing mechanism by which this happens and it has to do with the impact these experiences have on our mental health and on the body’s response to stress. Researchers report that anger, for instance, puts our body into a flight-or-flight response that results in an increased heart rate, higher blood pressure and reduced immune response (Swartz,

n.d.). In turn, these changes can impact our mental health.

### **Mental Health Impact**

Experiences of trauma, chronic stress or conflict early in life influences brain changes, and it is not surprising these changes in brain structure and negative psychological consequences have been documented in multiple studies of people exposed to violence in the home. In children and adults exposed to childhood abuse there is evidence of smaller frontal lobe and hippocampus as well as poor mental health (Danese & McEwen, 2012). These effects seem to influence the body’s stress load even more, producing cortisol and other powerful chemicals that negatively impact the physical health and quality of life of family trauma survivors. Besides these changes in the brain, both children and adult victims of family violence often experience fear, shame, guilt, and stigma. These negative emotions contribute to mental and emotional problems such as depression, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in both men and women (McCauley, et al., 1997) (Swartz, n.d.).

Likewise, studies show that adult women who experience abuse by an intimate partner report higher levels of depression and anxiety, panic attacks, sleep difficulty, PTSD, and suicidal ideation than those who do not (Campbell, et al., 2002). These conditions often continue even after physical injuries have healed and they may last a lifetime unless there is appropriate intervention.

### **Protective Factors**

Though there are real negative health outcomes in survivors of trauma, there is also hope! Not everyone who experiences

traumatic stress or abuse develops negative health outcomes. Studies suggest that a set of individual characteristics may interact dynamically to enable someone to bounce back using effective coping mechanisms that allow them to function above the norm in spite of any adversity they might have faced. Such characteristic is often described as resilience (Tusaie, 2004).

Positive coping factors contribute to resilience, helping people heal from their emotional wounds. These factors are protective against stress, trauma, and abusive relationships. Many of them are physiological, cognitive, lifestyle and spiritual in nature, and include cultivating positive emotions, gratitude, having cognitive flexibility, being altruistic, having social support, and utilizing faith, religion or spirituality (Tusaie, 2004). Among these resilience factors, forgiveness has been widely studied with robust evidence of its beneficial impact on health and wellbeing (Miller & Worthington, 2008) (Reinert, Campbell, Szanton, & Lee, 2016) (Toussaint & Worthington, 2017).

### Defining Forgiveness

Before we explore the benefits of forgiveness, let us begin with some definitions of forgiveness. This is an important first step because there are transactions between offender and offended that pass for forgiveness, but which are not.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, forgiveness is the act of forgiving, and to forgive means to cease to feel resentment against an offender or to grant relief from payment of a debt. Thus, to forgive implies that one gives up vengeful feelings against another. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). As such, in true forgiveness we

release others from condemnation and in turn find ourselves freed from the burdens of anger, hatred and resentment. Indeed, Corrie Ten Boom once wrote, “Forgiveness is the key which unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuff of hatred. It breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness” (Ten Boom & Buckingham, 1974, p. 197).

Researchers who have studied forgiveness for decades describe several types of forgiveness:

- *Divine forgiveness*: Forgiveness we receive from God.
- *Forgiveness of others*: Forgiving those who offended or wronged us.
- *Self-forgiveness*: Ability of finding relief from feelings of self-condemnation
- *Intergroup forgiveness*: Giving up resentment towards a group from a specific socio-political or cultural context happening on a social or community (not individual) scale. It is facilitated by the admission of guilt by the offending group and the development of trust by those offended.

In addition to these four types of forgiveness, Dr. Everett Worthington—a leader in the field of forgiveness research since 1990—describes two types of *forgiveness of others*: 1) *decisional forgiveness* (involving making a decision to forgive an offense and not seek revenge, while also letting go of angry, resentful thoughts and feelings towards the offender), and 2) *emotional forgiveness* (involving exchanging the negative emotions of bitterness and antagonism toward the offender with feelings of compassion, sympathy and empathy). Someone may experience *decisional forgiveness* towards

another, but still feel *emotional unforgiveness*, especially when the offense reoccurs, is long-lasting or ongoing (Toussaint & Worthington, 2017). *Emotional forgiveness* occurs as a second step after *decisional forgiveness*, and tends to be facilitated by gratitude, humility and hope. Forgiveness is not:

- Passing over or ignoring the offense
- Denying the reality of the offense
- Diminishing the importance of what happened
- Excusing the offender
- Holding the offender hostage

In essence, forgiveness involves a transformation of our negative thoughts, feelings and behavior towards an offender or perpetrator into positive ones, reducing our motivation to retaliate, as well as increasing our motivation for goodwill and reconciliation, whenever possible.

### **Biblical Foundation of Forgiveness**

The Bible gives us insight into what forgiveness means and how it relates to our relationships with ourselves, God and others. Below are some texts that shed light into this concept.

*Exodus 34: 6,7:* “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty.” There is an important balance here of God’s forgiveness and His justice.

*Ephesians 4:31-32:* “Be kind to one another, forgiving one another even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.” We are called to forgive others as we have experienced forgiveness ourselves.

*Matthew 18:21-22:* “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who

sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” Forgiveness is to be a principle of life, not conditional or limited.

*Matthew 18:23-35:* In this passage we have the parable of the unforgiving debtor. Jesus teaches that we are to forgive others as we have been forgiven. An unforgiving heart leads to bitterness and ultimately murder. We condemn ourselves to torment when we refuse to forgive.

*Matthew 6:12, 14-15:* “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”; For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” In these passages, forgiveness is freely given to all persons, but sometimes the hardness of our hearts prevents us from receiving the forgiveness God is freely giving.

### **Myths About Forgiveness**

*Forgive and Forget*

- Jesus will forever carry the scars of the crucifixion in his body. The scars will remain.
- God does not ask us to pretend that something did not happen or that it did not hurt us.
- On the other hand, God does cast our sins into the sea of forgetfulness and puts our sins away from us as far as the east is from the west (Isaiah 43:25). Therefore, when forgiven is given, the offense is never to be brought up again and used as a weapon against the offending party.

*Forgiveness implies trust*

- Trust must be earned. The offender must take steps to remedy the prob-

lem. If not, the person can be fully forgiven, but trusting them would be unwise and set both parties up for future pain. Forgiveness does not require trust.

- *Forgiveness is easy*
- Forgiveness is a process more than an event. A decision to forgive often must be made many times as a person wrestles with the pain and consequences of an offense.
- *As Christians, forgiveness is something that we “should” do right away*

It is unwise and even damaging for well-meaning persons to insist that a person forgive the offender before they are ready.

*Holding onto bitterness does not hurt anyone*

- Research shows that a person pays a heavy price physically and emotionally when bitterness and resentment are held onto. Relationships are also often strained or broken through unforgiveness.

## **Forgiveness and Health**

According to researchers forgiveness impacts health in three main domains: physical, mental and social (relational) (Davis, Green, Reid, Moloney, & Burnette, 2015). Below is a summary of the various health benefits of forgiveness for each domain.

### **Physical Health**

*Cardiovascular risk factors.* Among people who had a previous conflict, a higher forgiveness trait (desire to forgive) was associated with lower blood pressure, while scoring higher in having a state of forgiveness (having forgiven someone) was associated with both lower blood pressure and lower heart rate. On the other hand, a failure to forgive was associated with higher blood

pressure and heart rate for longer periods of time. Failure to forgive was also associated with stress and hostility, and self-reported illness. In addition, the motivation to forgive also impacts cardiovascular risk factors. Those motivated by religious duty (or pressure to forgive) tended to hold on to anger, and experienced higher blood pressure while describing the offense or conflict. In another study at a workplace, those who forgave because it was the moral thing to do, experienced less stress, but not better overall health, whereas those who felt they had no choice but to forgive experienced more stress and worse physical health.

*Stress Response.* The impact of forgiveness on health can be explained by the body's response to stress. When there is perceived stress (such as in the case of feeling offended, angry or wronged) the neuro-endocrine immune mechanisms (termed allostatic stress response) are overstimulated, producing a high allostatic load (Danese & McEwen, 2012).

This state of chronic stress leads to impaired immunity, obesity, diabetes, and atrophy of nerve cells in the brain. However, forgiveness can protect against these effects of conflict and perceived stress. Dr. Bruce McEwen, director of the neuroendocrinology lab at Rockefeller University in New York City, has studied the effects of cortisol. He concludes that, in the long term, cortisol wears down the brain, which leads to cell atrophy and memory loss. It also raises blood pressure and blood sugar, causes hardening of the arteries, and leads to heart disease. Forgiveness, it has been found, reduces the flow of cortisol.

Keeping your body in a permanent state of crisis means that what was meant to protect you in a crisis is now poisoning your



body and weakening your immune system. The diseases that have been studied in direct connection with long-term, low-grade anger are cancer, heart disease, and Type 2 adult-onset diabetes. In one study where college students described being wronged or betrayed by a close friend or relationship partner, those who reported greater forgiveness also reported better health. The better health was explained by their reduced perception of stress. There is evidence that *emotional forgiveness* has the most health effect because it reduces stress-related problems. This type of forgiveness toward others takes away the negative effects of anger and anxiety. (Toussaint & Worthington, 2017)

In summary, there is evidence that forgiveness is a protective factor for physical health as it relates to cardiovascular risk factors, stress response and its impact on immunity. This effect is impacted by the motivation to forgive (obligation versus love).

## **Mental Health**

*Overall Mental Health.* Forgiveness is also associated with overall mental health. In a study of 10,283 Seventh-day Adventist adults who had experienced trauma (physical, emotional or sexual abuse, neglect, and/or witnessed parental abuse) before the age of 18, those who scored higher in the measure of forgiving others had less negative impact of their traumatic experience on their mental health ( $B = .32$   $p = .025$ ) (Reinert, Campbell, Szanton, & Lee, 2016). Thus, for those adult survivors, the trait of forgiveness was protective against poor mental health. In another study where participants imagined forgiveness and unforgiveness and reported their feelings, those who focused on thoughts of unforgiveness (instead of forgiveness) experienced greater

anger, sadness, arousal, and less empathy and control. These feelings, as noted before can have a direct impact on the perception of stress, affecting mental wellbeing.

*Depression and anxiety.* In a study of undergraduate women who experienced abuse in their romantic relationship, as well as men and women who experienced a recent breakup, unforgiveness was associated with greater depressive symptoms in both samples, explained by their loss of control and perceived threat. Unforgiveness is also associated with anxiety symptoms. Among students who experienced significant trauma (like sexual assault, child abuse, dating abuse, etc.) with follow up feelings of fear, helplessness and loss of control, those who forgave the perpetrator experienced less symptoms of PTSD compared to those who did not. Forgiveness interventions seem to have a strong impact on mental health. College students who had been wrong in their romantic relationships (verbal or physical abuse, infidelity) were randomly assigned to either a group receiving a 90 minute forgiveness intervention or a wait-list. Those in the intervention group experienced fewer depressive symptoms and reported higher levels of wellbeing.

## **Social (Relational) Health**

Besides its impact on physical and mental health, forgiveness is also linked to social health. According to researchers, forgiveness of a partner, husband or friend is associated with stronger likelihood of resolving a betrayal, and predicted greater relationship satisfaction for both survivor and perpetrator. In addition, forgiveness predicted relationship commitment, increased levels of closeness, less revenge, avoidance and more benevolence towards the offender.



As a result, the offender reported increased commitment to the relationship. Therefore, forgiveness benefited both the offended and the offender. In summary, forgiveness was associated with greater trust, satisfaction, commitment and stability in the relationship.

Evidence suggests that *decisional forgiveness* has the largest effect on social or relational wellbeing, likely because it changes behaviors toward another.

It is important to note that these three domains of health are not isolated from each other, but interdependent. We are a wholistic being, where our physical, mental, social health and wellbeing are intertwined. Our relational wellbeing impacts our physical and mental health, and vice-versa. An anxiety or stress disorder will affect the quality of our social relationships. On the other hand, the Harvard study of Adult Development following adult males for nearly 80 years, has demonstrated that the quality of relationships are the strongest predictor of good health and longevity (Waldinger, 2016).

Overall, forgiveness contributes to physical, mental and social health and wellbeing not only for individuals and families, but also the community, contributing to peace and political reconciliation (Tousaint & Worthington, 2017).

### **The Process of Forgiveness**

The evidence points to the fact that forgiveness accompanies healing. In his book *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*, Dr. Bernie Siegel, an oncologist at Yale-New Haven Hospital, tells of a cancer patient who came to him, with nearly every organ of her body taken. Since there was nothing much that he could do for her, he suggested she

go home and make all the necessary arrangements for her imminent demise. She decided to go up to her lakeside cabin in the mountains and spend her last days there alone. While there, she began to think of all the people who had hurt her over her lifetime: a father, a brother, her own mother, and so forth. When she had written all their names down on a paper, she stood up and said, "I forgive *all* of you!" She reported later that, as she said those words, she felt a warm wave through her body. The next day she felt stronger and the next day after that, until, after two weeks of gaining strength she called Dr. Siegel to have him re-run tests on her. To his amazement, there was no trace of cancer anywhere in her body! (Siegel, n.d.). Not everyone may experience physical healing of a terminal illness, but emotional and spiritual healing occur, and often times lead to better physical health and wellbeing.

### **Strategies For Getting Past An Offense Through Forgiveness**

There are many methods used in teaching people how to forgive. After years of research on forgiveness, Dr. Worthington has developed a model with steps people can take as they engage in the process of forgiveness. He calls his model the *R.E.A.C.H. Model of Forgiveness*. (Worthington).

- **Recall the hurt** in all its painful detail and acknowledge that the offense did hurt you and determine how it hurt you. This recognition is important as a starting point. If you excuse or pass over the offense, there won't be anything to forgive!
- **Empathize with the offender** by reframing him or her as a vulnerable

child victimized in the same way he or she has victimized you.

- **Altruistic gift of forgiveness is given.** Clearly recognizing how much this person hurt you, you choose to give them the gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness is always a gift because it cannot reverse the effects of an offense and return to the way things were prior to the offense. It can only ameliorate and soften the effects of an offense by intentionally covering them with a mantle of grace.
- **Commitment to forgive.** You make the decision to forgive in order to begin the “forgiveness journey.” Forgiveness is not a one-time event, but a journey that leads, eventually, to complete freedom from the damaging emotional effects of an offense.
- **Hold onto forgiveness.** There will be days when it is harder to hold on to your commitment to forgive than others. Even so, don’t give up too soon—you may be surprised by the rewards of gentle persistence.

## Forgiveness and Families

Knowing how to forgive is one of the critical skills impacting family relationships and marriage satisfaction. Often times family members are faced with emotional pain resulting from an offense, and they think, talk, and consider whether they should forgive a father, mother, child, spouse, sibling or someone else in the family for what they have done. When they ponder whether to forgive what they are often saying is: can I trust this person again? In other words, should I reconcile with him or her? Reconciliation is the restoration of trust when trust has been damaged in a relationship. As

noted before, forgiveness does not depend on trust. But reconciliation does. Reconciliation depends not on one individual, but on both. Whereas forgiveness—decisional or emotional or both—is something we can do ourselves with God’s help and when we are ready, reconciliation happens between two or more people. Thus, reconciliation depends on mutually trustworthy behaviors until trust can be restored.

In some cases, reconciliation is not possible or advisable, but even then forgiveness can still take place. Once you have offered forgiveness to your offender, you have initiated the “forgiveness journey.” The decision to forgive happens as a result of a choice you made but forgiveness is both a one-time decision and a lifetime of commitment to keeping the forgiveness promise. Sometimes, new rules need to be set for the relationship to continue and reconciliation to take place, especially in abusive situations, if it seems prudent to continue in a relationship after the hurtful events. Setting “boundaries” is important so that each person understands what she or he can or cannot do. Even if the relationship cannot continue, it is important for both parties to understand boundaries.

What if you are the offender? Here are some steps that can be helpful to follow:

- Go to the person you have hurt and ask them to forgive you
- Do so without offering excuses
- If the person you have offended accepts your apology, you have gained a friend. But if they choose not to, don’t carry that burden.
- Pray for this person

What if your offender cannot be reached? The truth is that neither mental illness nor death erase a grave offense unless

the victim or survivor has decided to forgive the aggressor.

Sometimes, writing a letter to a deceased aggressor, verbalizing deep feelings and the desire to forgive can unburden the soul and release a person from a heavy emotional load. In some cases, even though the person may live in a different country or be difficult to reach in person, one can forgive deep in the heart, and perhaps attempt to reach out through FaceTime or other electronic means, until a personal encounter can take place.

### **Forgiveness: A Catalyst for Healing and Transformation**

Fifteen years after leaving Palau and the traumatic experience of loss, Melissa de Pava had the opportunity to return. In 2018, now in her mid-twenties and married, she made the trip back, along with her grandparents. Over the years, Justin remembered how Melissa's grandmother Ruth said she forgave him, and encouraged him to get to seek God. Her grandparents sent him spiritual books to read and prayed for him. Years passed and after Bible studies, he decided to give His life to God and became a witness in the prison. In her return visit, Melissa had the opportunity to see the place where she had been left for dead. The Queen of Palau had planted two coconut trees as a memorial for her miraculous survival. Melissa also visited Justin in jail where he was still serving several life sentences without parole, and in tears she told him: "Justin, we are all the same in God's sight. We are no better than you are. We are all in need of God's saving grace in our lives. I want to see you in heaven one day with my parents and my brother." (Hamel, 2019)

What a witness of God's power to transform through forgiveness! Corrie Ten Boom, in her book *Tramp for the Lord*, describes the experience of fellow survivors from concentration camps during the second world war: "Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that" (Ten Boom & Buckingham, 1974, p.57).

The Bible reminds us, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8,9). Forgiveness leads to resilience and transformation. May we seek God's help in learning how to forgive. The health benefits are evident, but more evident is the transformation that can occur in our life, most especially in our families.

### **Challenge and Call to Action**

In the book *Adventist Home*, White challenges us: "How many dishonor Christ and misrepresent His character in the home circle! How many do not manifest patience, forbearance, *forgiveness*, and true love! Many have their likes and dislikes and feel at liberty to manifest their own perverse disposition rather than to reveal the will, the works, the character of Christ. The life of Jesus is full of kindness and love. Are you growing into His divine nature?" (White, 1952, p. 178). Are you willing to grow in your forgiveness journey towards others, especially at home?

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What are effective ways to ask for or express forgiveness towards someone who is no longer alive?

2. Should forgiveness be granted to someone who is not sorry for their behavior, and has not asked to be forgiven?
3. In the case of a crime, or abuse in the family, how can forgiveness be expressed and what boundaries should be put in place?

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# FORGIVENESS AND LOVING WELL IN CASES OF ABUSE: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

*Forgiveness is a key aspect of healing after abuse; however, it cannot be forced or rushed. Choosing to forgive requires neither reconciliation nor restoration of trust in the absence of genuine and lasting repentance on the part of the abuser. The biblical principle of free will requires Christians to respect the choice of an abusive person to refuse repentance. Religious leaders must understand and be equipped to recognize dynamics of abuse, in order to avoid re-traumatizing victims. In cases of abuse, Matthew 18:15-17 does not, and cannot, apply as a method of conflict-resolution, specifically in cases of power differentials. Instead, those in positions of power are expected by God to provide safety and support to the victim. Urging the victim to forgive rapidly while enabling the abuser to continue in sin, is a perpetuation of the serpent's first lie in the Garden, that sin does not cause death. The purpose of this paper is to examine biblical forgiveness in the context of abuse, provide insight on the concept of double abuse, and deconstruct common misunderstandings pertaining to abuse, forgiveness, and reconciliation.*

## **Introduction**

Sexual, emotional, and physical abuse are prevalent problems in faith communities worldwide (Terry, 2015; Dixon, 1999). The effects of abuse have been documented to manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, gastrointestinal issues, and lower life satisfaction (Bremner, 2003; Horwitz et al., 2001; Silber, 2018). Despite the severe and long-term consequences experienced by survivors, survivors are often persuaded by church leadership to provide swift forgiveness and reconciliation, “with little understanding of the complexity of trust, reconciliation, and repentance” (Dixon, 1999, p. 74). Consequently, many survivors are pressured to forgive the perpetrator

of abuse as a solution for church unity before the full scope of wrongdoing has been acknowledged or properly addressed (Horsfield, 2003).

Anecdotally, survivors have heard the following in an attempt for clergy and other religious leaders to facilitate swift reconciliation: Forgive and forget; Let it go; If you don't forgive, God won't forgive you, and you're doomed; and Don't keep dredging up the past (Doyle, 2009; Horsfield, 2003; Tracy, 1999). These statements are evidence of community leaders devoid of appropriate theological and psychological training pertaining to the effects and recovery characteristics of abuse (Dixon, 1999). Furthermore, many survivors of abuse feel they are faced

with no healthy choices when it comes to forgiving their perpetrator; either they feel obligated to forgive *now* and promptly re-extend trust, or they risk alienation from a tyrannical God who will hold them hostage for their pain (Horsfield, 2003). Therefore, it is vital and necessary for spiritual leaders and professional care providers to be equipped with the tools to identify abuse, comprehend the contrary nature of abuse with scripture, and be prepared to facilitate justice as needed.

### **Aims**

This paper aims to examine biblical forgiveness in the context of abuse, provide insight on the concept of double abuse, and deconstruct common misconceptions pertaining to abuse, forgiveness, and reconciliation in religious contexts.

### **Forgiveness**

Toussaint et al. (2012) defined forgiveness as replacing negative feelings towards a transgressor, such as revenge and resentment with compassion and kindness. Three types of forgiveness have been identified: 1. forgiveness of self, 2. forgiveness of others, and 3. forgiveness by God (Morton et al., 2019). Psalm 82 Initiative expanded upon Morton's definition stating:

There is a forgiveness that relinquishes my desire for vengeance and frees my own heart. This is not optional, requires nothing from the offender, and is necessary for my own personal healing. There is also a forgiveness that seeks reconciliation with the offender and moves toward a trusting relationship. This is conditional and depends entirely on the offender's repentance, but even then, forgiveness does not demand

the removal of just consequences, which may permanently alter the nature of the relationship. The first is demonstrated when Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying him. The second is explained when Jesus taught that forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance (2021).

This idea is further augmented in Tracy's model of forgiveness as judicial, psychological, and relational (1999). Judicial forgiveness is the pardoning of sin which can be granted only by God, and cannot be given by church leadership or by the survivor. Psychological forgiveness is twofold; it is as Toussaint stated, the letting go of hatred, but also involves an extension of grace (Tracy, 1999). Crucial to this understanding is that relevant literature indicates psychological forgiveness of abusers means releasing the right to personal revenge; it is imperative to comprehend that such evil can be simultaneously forgiven and yet still incur the earthly consequences to which the act itself deserves. Finally, relational forgiveness is the restoration of relationship, or reconciliation (Tracy, 1999). This is the desirable and ultimate biblical form of forgiveness, but it is not always possible, because it is conditional both on the repentance of the abuser and the regained trust of the survivor.

In a qualitative study on abuse in religious communities, survivors agreed that forgiveness was necessary for their own growth (Dixon, 1999). However, the same study revealed that church leaders compounded survivors' abuse by believing the perpetrator, encouraging quick forgiveness, pressuring victims to make marriages work, and assuming prayer alone would provide

sufficient recovery (Dixon, 1999). It is crucial for church leaders to understand that forced forgiveness is a terrifying reality and a contributing factor as to why abuse victims fear to come forward, especially when the abuser is in a leadership role such as pastor, elder, or other clergy member (Berry, 1992; Doyle, 2009). Instead of feeling protected, the abused individual is often re-victimized by forced reconciliation attempts (Doyle, 2009).

These cultural “fix-all” solutions perpetuate dissonance within the community, fostering an environment predisposed to rush the process of forgiveness, and creating a system where abusers feel entitled to demand forgiveness rather than focusing on their own repentance. This is contrary to scripture. Luke 17:3 says *if* there is repentance, *then* forgive. Furthermore, this approach either intentionally or unwittingly enables the morally disordered person to continue abusing power over their victim, or frees them to move elsewhere into exploitative power over new victims (Horsfield, 2003). The displacement of God’s word and breach of spiritual order of operations has generated a phenomenon known as double abuse.

### **Double Abuse**

Double abuse occurs when individuals in power possess the opportunity to report or end the abuse, but choose not to do so, or when well-meaning helpers unwittingly offer harmful, damaging advice that worsens the victim’s situation or endangers their safety (Cooper-White, 1995; Tracy, 1999). An example of double abuse can be seen when religious leaders push for immediate reconciliation and trust between abuser and victim (McDugal, 2017b).

A surface examination of scripture may encourage a church leader to persuade victims to forgive and restore relationships. Specifically, Matthew 18:15-17 has been recommended as a biblical archetype to conflict resolution (Machingura, 2010). This application of scripture to an abuse situation is a common blueprint for double abuse in spiritual communities. Matthew 18’s reconciliation passage directs the person who observes sin being perpetrated by a brother, a peer, or an equal, to confront the sinner first in private. To recommend this course of action in a case of abuse ignores the equality demanded of the participants in this style of reconciliation. Furthermore, Ramshaw argues that improper application of Matthew 18 “serves the interests of those in power, legitimating the authorities’ practice of discipline and letting abusers off the hook” (1998, p. 399).

Contrast the misapplication of Matthew 18 with Christ’s actions when He found a traumatized woman huddled on the ground in terror (John, 8, New King James Version). Christ did not tell her to take a seat across from her accusers as an equal player in the scenario. Instead, He sheltered her, pointed out the arrogance of those spiritual leaders condemning her participation, and then publicly exposed *their* secret sins by writing in the sand for all to see. Jesus did not force her to extend trust or reconcile with the men who humiliated her. He placed the burden of change squarely where it belonged—on the shoulders of the abusers. And He did it in a way that never violated the free will of either victim or perpetrator. Jesus’ example offers a profound and practical solution which illustrates how church leaders, counselors, and advocates should handle abusive situations.

Based on the principles found in scripture, if an abuser presents the following behavior:

1. refuses to acknowledge and take responsibility for the abuse;
2. submit to the length of time required to prove lasting heart change,
3. argues against restrictive measures provided by accountability structure, or
4. balks at the practice of investing humble energy into restitution,

then they are demanding the privileges of reconciliation without exhibiting change. Facilitating or recommending reconciliation or forgiveness on the part of the injured party without first ensuring the safety of the victim, and insisting on time and evidence of proven repentance on the part of the abuser is promoting double abuse.

In addition, any leader or counselor who pressures a victim into reconciling before healing has occurred, or who guilt-trips a victim into extending trust when the abuser has not shown lasting repentance—is, unwittingly or intentionally, collaborating as an agent of Satan in perpetuating the first lie that sin does not cause death. These leaders unbiblically equate the extension of forgiveness with the acts of restoration and absolution. They do not recognize that persistently cherished sin requires escalating consequences to match, in a loving attempt to bring about redemption. “For survivors of sexual abuse, the most damaging definitions of forgiveness are those which conflate forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation, eliminating the possibility of negative consequences for the offender” (Tracy, 1999, p. 220). Furthermore, a press for premature reconciliation can, in addition to re-abusing

the victim, validate the perpetrator and hinder judicial forgiveness, because judicial forgiveness cannot occur without admission of guilt and repentance (Tracy, 1999).

### **Perpetuating the Oldest Lie**

“You shall not surely die” (Genesis 3:4, New King James Version). It is the world’s oldest and most insidious lie. It is humanity’s original deception, Satan’s alluring idea that you can do as you please, *when it does not please God*, and yet lose nothing. It is the first untruth told to the human race, when the serpent lured Eve into the prideful fantasy of gratifying herself without consequence (Genesis 2, New King James Version). Satan’s weapon is deception laced with particles of truth. Similarly to the Garden, Satan met Jesus while Jesus was fasting and attempted to twist scripture for his own gain (Matthew 4, New King James Version). The difference between the Garden and the wilderness is that Eve and humanity was harmed by accepting the twisted version of God’s word, and Jesus was not, because he did not accept Satan’s proof-texted version of scripture; he knew the character of God and scripture as a whole.

Faith community leaders and abusers have been documented to utilize scriptures, such as Matthew 18, to demand both forgiveness and reconciliation when it is not healthy or safe to do so (Kroeger & Beck, 2019). Misapplication of scripture not only misrepresents the character of God, but also compounds abuse (Kroeger & Beck, 2019). For many survivors of abuse, the insidious nature of psychological, emotional, and spiritual mistreatment makes it more difficult to discern the patterns, and to determine which behaviors need forgiving. When an abuser lives on broken promises

and shattered trust shored up by the props of twisted Scripture and warped theologies about power and control, the abuse can feel invisible. Biblical forgiveness, therefore, specifically in cases of sexual abuse, is judicial, psychological, and relational (Tracy, 1999). Many church leaders' reductionist approach to forgiveness (i.e. letting go), ignore the perpetual reality in which humanity is entrenched—the great controversy between good and evil.

### **Misconceptions Pertaining to the Forgiveness Process**

I was four years old, and my childish disobedience resulted in some unpleasant consequences. “Do you forgive me, Mommy?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied, and proceeded to administer my discipline. “Wait!” I balked. “If you forgive me, then you can't still give me consequences!”

Mama sat in her rocking chair and opened her Bible to 1 Chronicles 21. She explained the story to me, how God had called King David to rely fully and completely on Him for protection against Israel's enemies, but David decided he needed to know how many soldiers he had in his army. Against divine counsel, David commissioned a census. Not that counting his citizens was wrong per se, but the action implied that David wasn't trusting God to follow through. And he did it even though he'd been told not to.

After the census, God confronted David's disobedience. David responded, “I have sinned very much by doing this thing. But now I beg You, take away the sin of Your servant for I have done a very foolish thing.” (1 Chronicles 21:9)

It is clear that David exhibited deep sorrow. He begged God to extend forgiveness

*and* wipe his slate clean. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) God promises to forgive those who confess.

But David's narrative indicates that the presence of forgiveness does not necessarily remove the administration of consequences. Gad, the prophet, brought a divine message saying, “I give you three things to choose from. Choose one of them.” (1 Chronicles 21:10-12) David was forced to decide which punishment would be enacted on his people, knowing his decision to distrust God's ability to protect was that catalyst for loss of innocent lives.

Even as a four-year-old, I could recognize the clear message—human choices have consequences. I may be fully forgiven, but my selfish actions still hurt people. I am free to obey or disobey. Free to be kind or cruel. Free to love or hate. And equally so, to my dismay, is everyone else.

### *Forgiveness is Forgetting.*

Doyle (2009) conveys that the oft-held theological concept that forgiveness equals forgetting and forgoing any expectation of justice is a misunderstanding of both biblical forgiveness and biblical justice. “This attitude imposes misplaced guilt on the victims for their justifiably angry feelings against their perpetrators,” thus re-victimizing the hurt party (Doyle, 2009, p. 246). This concept is often employed as a means to ease the tension as well as to avoid scandal, legal action, or opposition to power (Horsfield, 2003). In other words, forgiveness is utilized as a means of self or institutional preservation, rather than for its intended purposes. Forgetting implies that one is not supposed to learn any lessons or



grow from the painful experience, and that the other person does not need to be held accountable.

*Forgiveness is Unconditional.*

Whether due to efforts to cover up abuse in the church, misunderstandings of the theological concept of forgiveness, or lack of relevant training in how to guide survivors through the forgiveness process, the faith community has cultivated an expedited forgiveness culture where perpetrators are far too often not held accountable. This can manifest as failure to ensure that the abusive behavior has ceased or refusal of the perpetrator to acknowledge their wrong (Horsfield, 2003).

When faith communities rescue perpetrators (even family and friends) from God-ordained consequences designed to lead them into repentance, they ultimately proclaim God unloving and begin writing their own law. Ignoring God's call for repentance preceding forgiveness is following in the footsteps of Satan in an attempt to usurp God's authority and wisdom. Following God's example to enact consequences is in fact the most loving thing for both victim and abuser.

If the abuser is not expected to shoulder the fallout of their actions, their own personal and spiritual growth is hampered. Selfish entitlement is encouraged in human nature when there is no consequence experienced as the result of one's harm perpetrated against others. Without the chance to redirect energy into building up love through safe and respectful actions, an abusive person is prevented from the full opportunity to experience genuine repentance, reconciliation, and redemption.

Enabling any abuser to circumvent the process of restoration, to skip or shorten the experience of making restitution and rebuilding trust over time, is to cripple their desperately needed journey of transformation. At the same time, this approach reinforces a victim's devastation rather than initiating a process of healing—precisely because the process was short-circuited by well-meaning people who perpetuate Satan's original lie that sin does not actually kill things. Thus, hasty reconciliation without time and expectation for an abuser to show the fruit of lasting repentance not only re-traumatizes the victim, it harmfully enables the abuser.

*Forgiveness is Absolution without Restitution.*

God does not practice blind restoration, even in His own relationships (Isaiah 1, New King James Version).

What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?" says the Lord. I want no more of your pious meetings. I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows (Isaiah 1:11-17, New King James Version).

Far too often, spiritual leaders support the abuser by urging the victim to "just forgive and forget," rather than focusing



attention on the abuser's need to repent and transform harmful behavior patterns into safe ones. As a clergy spouse, I experienced more than a decade of sexual, psychological, financial, emotional and spiritual abuse by my husband and his family.

When his hidden life of infidelity, deception, and addiction was exposed, several other pastors strongly urged me to stop insisting on proof of changed behavior. One pastor called me shortly after this became public knowledge, sounding solicitous and compassionate as the conversation began. Then his tone changed, and he began scolding me for holding an "impossibly high standard of sexual faithfulness," and for my hesitance to extend instant absolution.

"If you stop demanding that he be totally faithful to you, everything will be fine. You can't expect him to change this much. You are controlling to insist that he must prove that he is no longer cheating or watching other people have sex on a screen. This is unreasonable. Your place as a wife is to simply trust him! You must forgive and trust!"

I was appalled, re-traumatized, and deeply discouraged by the systemic message from leaders and mentors, that my forgiveness could somehow singlehandedly create a safe and healthy dynamic.

Not long after, a conference administrator told me that if I continued insisting on evidence of changed behavior before restoring complete freedom and trust, before extending unfettered reconciliation and all its accompanying privileges—then I was guilty of being "unforgiving" and God would refuse to forgive me for any of my sins. He insisted that expecting accountability and proof of transformation after being treated with violence, threats, verbal abuse, systemic

deception, and sexual infidelity was simply too much. "Just keep giving him a chance to do better," he said.

This approach is a powerfully effective method to deflect focus away from restitution while placing the burden of reconciliation on the victim, and risking safety by allowing the abuser's entitlement to continue unchecked.

### *Forgiveness equals Trust and Restoration*

Relational forgiveness cannot occur without trust, and only follows when the perpetrator has shown proven, lasting, consistent signs of genuine change. Forgiveness can (and often should) occur while simultaneously seeking justice. It is possible to forgive, and yet internalize the lessons the situation taught about steering clear of selfish people. Forgiving someone does not by default create an environment where it is safe to trust them. "Confusing the two causes immense damage and misrepresents the character of God" (McDugal, 2017a).

Church theology often describes the Christian stance of reconciliation in the following way: "We must be fair. We must listen to both sides of the story. If the two sides can only meet to talk and negotiate they will sort out their differences and misunderstandings, and the conflict will be resolved." On the face of it this may sound very Christian. But is it? The fallacy here is that 'reconciliation' has been made into an absolute principle that must be applied in all cases of conflict or dissension. But not all cases of conflict are the same. We can imagine a private quarrel between two people or two groups whose differences are

based upon misunderstandings. In such cases it would be appropriate to talk and negotiate to sort out the misunderstandings and to reconcile the two sides. But there are other conflicts in which one side is right and the other wrong. There are conflicts where one side is a fully armed and violent oppressor while the other side is defenseless and oppressed. There are conflicts that can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil, God and the devil. To speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation; it is total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant (Kairos Theologians, 1985, p. 8-9).

To communicate that forgiveness and restoration of prior relationship are synonymous, and therefore that if survivors do not relationally forgive (restore the relationship to its original state) then they have not embraced forgiveness, encourages the ideology that unless the abused reunite with the abuser, they are damned as a result of their rightful inability to trust (Tracy, 1999). This model is unbiblical.

### *Forgiveness is a Feeling*

Survivors and church leaders often believe that forgiveness and outrage cannot coincide. However, outrage can at times be a holy emotion. God is angry when his children are hurt, specifically by those who claim His name. In the judicial forgiveness paradigm of releasing judgement to God, forgiveness is not an emotion, but rather an emotional transformation (Hou-rigan, 2019).

## **Discussion, Conclusion, and Future Recommendations**

Forgiveness and love are critical components of the Christian experience. The most loving act in human history is found in the canon of scripture when Jesus laid his life down and took the sin and shame of the world upon Himself. Because of His sacrifice, He will bear the marks of the crucifixion forever. These marks shall remain for all eternity for humanity to remember the pain and price of sin (White, 1991). In the same manner, the scars of abuse can and should be viewed as a reminder of the pain that has occurred, so that abuse will never flourish in a religious community again. By attempting to placate or erase the pain of abuse through swift forgiveness and reconciliation without repentance, the church misses an opportunity to enact Jesus' example, to comprehend and empathize with pain, protect the vulnerable, and be the literal hands and feet of Jesus, meaning to look upon the scars as a remembrance to never sin again.

Anything resembling force, whether forgiveness, "love," or repentance, is contrary to the nature of Christ, and should not be emulated by His followers. Victims cannot be forced to forgive. Abusers cannot be forced to repent. To do either, is to violate God's law of love and liberty. Free will means forgiveness occurs purposefully and voluntarily. Simultaneously, free will also means respecting the choice of an unrepentant abuser *not* to change, *not* to submit to accountability, and *not* to embrace lasting humility.

Clergy abuse and misconduct is not a myth, nor is abuse and misconduct by Christians. Documented encounters are present in the Baptist, Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist denominations among

others (Finucane, 1999; Nadolny, 2020; Terry, 2015). Sadly, the most common scenario features those in power bungling the fallout, staying silent, under-reporting criminal behavior, blaming the victim(s), and ultimately enabling the abuser's freedom to continue harm in some way or another (Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Züst et al., 2017).

Silence is not how God defines loving others well. Silence is not the scriptural formula for inspiring abusers to embrace humble change. Silence is not part of the biblical process of forgiveness. Silence does not bring transformation. Silence does not facilitate healing. Silence does not save the lambs. Rather, Scripture calls us to show love by speaking the truth about sin. "What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter" (Isaiah 5:20, New King James Version). Minimizing sin, making it appear to be less dangerous than it is in God's eyes is the opposite of God's way of handling those who reject His law of love.

When clergy or counselors suggest to victims that they should keep suffering abuse in order to win an abuser to Jesus, they're projecting a fraudulent, forgiveness-based savior role onto the abused. This approach silences the victim by manipulating their good conscience and their desire to do right. This model effectively places the victim in the role of Christ on the cross, sacrificing themselves for the protection of the

abuser. Simultaneously, this prevents the abuser from experiencing the full weight of the well-earned consequences. When humans perpetuate this model of setting humans up to do God's job for God, it is called blasphemy; it is not the gospel.

Christ calls us to follow His example: exposing sin, comforting the traumatized, and loving both victim and abuser well by seeking safety for the victim and transformational accountability for the abuser. Critical to the individual's and community's capacity to release bitterness and truly forgive those who have caused us pain, lies in *first* recognizing the truth of how much we have been wounded.

The mismanagement of abuse by religious leaders in authority is often a compounding factor to survivors abuse and PTSD. As shepherds and teachers of the gospel, this behavior is incompatible with the actions and directives of Christ. Therefore, to effectively protect the vulnerable populations, it is the recommendation of these authors for all church leaders to participate in trauma-informed sessions. Information from this article and from trauma-informed counseling sessions may provide a pathway to help pastoral and counseling staff help the hurting, rather than compound previous abuse.

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## FORGIVENESS AND COUPLE THERAPY

*A familiar biblical imperative is clear about the significance of forgiveness: “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Matt.6:15 Why did Jesus say this was important? Watson (2017) suggests the following: “In relationships, forgiveness is liberating. It frees us from a negative attachment to a person who has hurt us. This liberates us from the cycle of negativity and anger allowing us to open our hearts to gratitude.” Gratitude paves the way and allows a person to experience forgiveness. And the more one is open to practicing gratitude the greater chance you become more open to the idea of forgiving people too. Nelson Mandela(1994), who spent a long time in prison for his political beliefs, summarized it this way: “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’ll still be in prison.”*

### **What is Forgiveness?**

Those who have researched forgiveness have made this point. It is not how we relate to another person, or our ability to regain intimacy, or to be reconciled to a person who hurt you but rather it’s about *you* and your *heart’s condition*. But how can the *heart condition* be changed? A spiritual transformation must take place by being partakers of the divine nature. Apostle Paul informs us we must “Be transformed by the renewing of mind” (Romans 12:2). Negative emotions such as hate, envy, jealous, anger (Gal.5:20,21) must be replaced with positive emotions such as love, joy, peace and longsuffering (Gal.5:22,23) by reflecting the fruit of the Spirit. If positive emotions are practiced, individuals will be in the best condition to ponder and create new neural pathways and be open to what is true, pure, lovely, virtuous, and anything praiseworthy (Phil.4:8). We will be able to meditate or think on those things using thought

control. Using thought control influences our emotional condition! For example, engaging in words that are praiseworthy means offering up a sense of gratitude, thankfulness, joy and appreciation. It is an attitude that changes us from within. However, when forgiveness doesn’t exist within a person the anger, resentment and hurt can make a person ill both on an emotional and physical level. The result will be an impaired relationship and physical pain.

Counselors know that their clients are responsible for their own peace of mind and health. The choices a person makes influences one’s ability to resolve interpersonal relationship conflicts and to make better choices. As a therapist, working with your client to forgive another person is among the greatest challenges faced in therapy. The challenge becomes even more acute when it is faced by spiritual or religious values a person possesses. A person may want to really express that Christian love of forgiveness in

a relationship but the emotional road blocks that exists make it seem impossible to do.

For the process of healing to start, we must first realize that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. We must make that very clear for couples' therapy to be successful. Forgiveness is what you do for yourself and reconciliation is between two people coming together who have forgiven each other and themselves. Forgiveness does not imply reconciliation. But forgiveness is the foundation from which reconciliation can take place.

### **Narcissism, Neuroticism, and Negative Emotions**

According to Dashnaw (2018), narcissism, neuroticism, and negative emotions are the primary reasons why forgiveness does not happen in a relationship.

The narcissist cannot achieve real forgiveness but only moves them to promote their own sense of self satisfaction. Narcissism is very destructive for any kind of positive relationship to develop. The narcissist will use shaming and guilt to carefully manipulate the other person to achieve their goal. Forgiveness is something the other person in a relationship is expected to do but not the narcissist.

The neurotic faces a different situation. Their anxiety is so strong that it impairs consideration of the other person. The neurotic fears that forgiving someone will create an unmanageable amount anxiety and pain for themselves. They do this by constantly ruminating. Peluso (2007) indicates that neurotic individuals like to ruminate. Rumination actually blocks or interferes with forgiveness occurring in a marriage. Negative emotions are continually created within their mind. The neurotic finds

it very challenging to devise up a solution but rather spend time blaming themselves or others.

Lastly, negative emotions are expressed through anger, hostility, temper tantrums, resentment, and hatred toward the other person and will effectively compromise health and marital relationship wellness. An angry emotional state triggers the increase of stress chemicals known as adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine. Consequently, there are some serious negative health for experiencing and recalling negative emotions. Research indicates that high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, and a poorly functioning immune system are experienced (Luskin, 1999; Swartz, 2014). That means every time you recall the distressing situation, you release more damaging chemicals. This situation may become chronic inflammation. Body responds to anger and resentment by becoming inflamed. Research indicates that continued inflammation creates many health issues: such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and autoimmune weakness (Nordqvist, 2017; Leitma, 2020).

According to Luskin(1999), dwelling on the past with negative emotions is destructive. He has found that mismanaged anger and hostility is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

Luskin, who is the director of the Stanford University Forgiveness project, says "forgiveness boils down to a simple choice: whether to dwell over the past hurts or try to see the good in others." When you don't forgive you release all the stress chemicals which we know have a negative impact on health and on your relationships.

On the other hand, Donsky (2019) found that the act of forgiving someone can raise sense of optimism, happiness, and

hope. Not forgiving and holding resentment is correlated with anxiety, hostility, depression, and major psychiatric disorders. If you forgive someone, you won't experience this spike in stress hormones.

Negative emotions are often expressed as emotional retaliation. As a result, any consideration of forgiveness is quickly dismissed as unwarranted or unearned. The result may be what Dashnaw (2018) calls negative forgiveness. What the narcissist, neurotic, and negative emotions have in common is using what is known as negative forgiveness. That is to say forgiveness without really meaning it. Saying it only for the benefit of the one being spoken to. This typically is a superficial attempt at forgiveness. On the other hand, positive forgiveness creates for couple's enhanced marital satisfaction, better conflict resolution, greater intimacy, and mutual empathy.

### **Achieving Positive Forgiveness For Couples**

There are six essential tasks for positive forgiveness to develop that the therapist should seek to accomplish with their clients:

1. **Evaluate Clients' Self regulation:** Must be able to manage negative emotions. Proper boundaries have to be set. Management of their own impulse and thoughts as well as recognizing the emotions in the other partner is critical for wellness (Dashnaw, 2018)
2. **Understand Offending Partner:** Cognitive flexibility and the ability to leave behind one's own prejudices and misconceptions about what the anger was all about is difficult. The discussion of the facts that divided the couple needs to be

fully understood and a mutually acceptable compromise be reached (Dashnaw, 2018)

3. **Fearless and Restless Self Examination:** Was there a trigger that caused that caused the relationship to come apart? What part did each spouse contribute for the failure of the relationship? (Dashnaw, 2018)
4. **Check for Past People Hovering:** Are there silent people from each partner's past that keep reminding them of the guilt or direction taken was wrong? (Dashnaw, 2018)
5. **What Do You Both Want to Achieve?:** Emotional space and separation sometimes is needed to allow time for each partner to evaluate their life circumstances, goals, and family obligations. Positive forgiveness in therapy means each person may need a "timeout" to allow forgiveness to become a reality with no pressure. Physical separation for a certain amount of time may allow time for self-reflection, goal redirection, and self-development (Dashnaw, 2018).
6. **Practice Soul-Wellness to Achieve Forgiveness:** Soul-Wellness is a new model for understanding mental health (Leitma, 2015). Soul-Wellness directs a person to achieve optimal healthful way of functioning and to seek a balanced brain and lifestyle. The principles incorporated in the Soul-Wellness Model may be very helpful to achieve a healthy and productive marital relationship.

### **What is the Soul-Wellness Model?**

Soul-Wellness is the balance and integration of The Will, The Mind and The Body. Healthful forgiveness means the Mind is at peace so that judgment, decision making, emotional regulation, thoughtful discernment is responsible for new ways to think and behave. The Will is what motives a person to engage in the process of forgiveness. The free will choice to start a new journey in life that does not look back but forward with adventure. The Body needs to be kept physically well through good lifestyle habits. Substance abuse of any kind is eliminated. Physical exercise, plant food diet, plenty of sunshine, water intake, and rest is required for the Mind and Body to optimally function. The Mind is dependent on a steady supply of nutrient/oxygenated rich blood supply. The result is an enhanced possibility for a Mind that can comprehend the practice of forgiveness and the depth of the new skills required for a better chance of healing the marriage. Positive forgiveness means that Soul-Wellness is practiced. Forgiveness in the context of Soul-Wellness is a powerful healing factor.

The therapist may desire to do a Soul-Wellness assessment for the couple to determine current strengths and weaknesses. The results may help direct therapy treatment. Please see appendix for the Soul-Wellness assessment tool.

What can a therapist do to assist those who are having difficulty practicing

forgiveness? Here are five practical techniques to start the process and how a therapist can teach their clients to practice forgiveness:

1. **Rewiring your brain in 3 minutes a day:** Breuning (2016) recommends to focus on good thoughts three minutes a day for 45 days or three times a day at one-minute intervals to create a new neural pathway. It takes 45 days for a new neural connection to be firmly in place to experience the world in a more positive way. This way you will slowly lessen the times you replay the hurt. Eventually, a new tape will play in your mind and new positive emotions will occur. Optimism, hope, compassion and greater self-confidence will replace the negative thoughts (Patri, 2017). Thought control!
2. **Write a letter to your spouse who hurt you. Don't send it:** List the ways you have been wronged and hurt. Describe how this affected you. End the letter by writing you have forgiven them. This letter is actually for you! (Carpenter Smith Consulting, 2019).
3. **Reflect on times you've been forgiven:** Given the instruction in the Lord's prayer "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Matt.6:12. We have no choice. Many of us have hurt someone by our words or actions. We need to reflect on our experience of forgiveness and what it has meant to forgive someone else. Clinically we know that individual healing starts in a counseling session when

the client can forgive that person who hurt them. We must examine ourselves first. We have to accept our responsibility for our emotions, decisions, and ultimately our health practices (Carpenter Smith Consulting, 2019).

4. **Meditate on God's Word:** Inspiration informs us how dramatic forgiveness can be experienced in our life by dwelling on his Word: "O how many souls are starving for words of tenderness, for words of brotherly kindness, for words of hope, of faith, of forgiveness, of Christlike love, that will not quench the last spark of hope: "And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought(joy, contentment, happiness), and make fat thy bones(immune system benefit) ; and thou shalt be like a watered garden (hope & optimism) and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." (White, 1905)
5. **Teach Soul-Wellness Principles:** Soul-Wellness should be the center focus for a well-balanced and productive person (Leitma, 2015). This will allow the couple to achieve better communication and growth in a relationship. When The Will, The Mind and The Body are integrated it forms the foundation for forgiveness to thrive. The therapist can assess the three components of Soul-Wellness and construct a treatment plan that will address the weaker areas. See Soul-Wellness appendix for the assessment tool.

## Summary

Forgiveness is an important factor that will contribute to emotional wellness and relationship satisfaction. Forgiveness is a personal choice that has significant impact on the quality of our physical and mental health. When we can take hold of the biblical wisdom from Proverbs 17:22, "A merry heart doth good like medicine and a broken spirit drieth the bones," we are promised it will increase our ability to promote positive relationships that will create peace of mind when we learn to forgive one another. The consequences for not achieving forgiveness in a relationship are serious ones. Real positive forgiveness is growth toward a better marriage relationship.

# SOUL-WELLNESS ASSESSMENT

**Directions:** Use the following scale to respond to the following statements:

0= Never

1= Infrequently

2= Sometimes

3= All the time

## *The Will*

\_\_\_ I wish I had more power and control over others.

\_\_\_ I dream about money a lot, as in getting more of it.

\_\_\_ I have missed important family events in order to pursue my career.

\_\_\_ I keep telling myself if I work hard enough and long enough I can finally relax and spend time with family/friends.

\_\_\_ I have secrets that I am willing to lie to protect.

\_\_\_ I enjoy manipulating others at work and home.

\_\_\_ **TOTAL for The WILL**

18–12 Must consider immediate positive intervention for Will improvement!

11–5 Needs some work to improve but fairly balanced.

4–0 Good use of The Will; Congratulations!

## *The Mind*

\_\_\_ I sometimes fantasize about winning the lottery or gaining a large inheritance.

\_\_\_ I make a mental list of things I like to buy if money were not the object.

\_\_\_ My spouse or co-workers do not respect me enough.

\_\_\_ I would set aside my personal values to pursue something important if no one else knew about it.

\_\_\_ I have things that if they were lost, outside of my family or others who I love, that I would be emotionally crushed and devastated.

\_\_\_ I spend more than I earn.

\_\_\_ **TOTAL for The MIND**

18–12 Must consider immediate positive intervention for Will improvement!

11–5 Needs some work to improve but fairly balanced.

4–0 Good use of The Will; Congratulations!

## *The Body*

\_\_\_ If my doctor told me to give up certain bad lifestyle habits (drinking, smoking, red meat, salt, sugar, caffeine) I would find it nearly impossible or difficult to do.

\_\_\_ I let my temper fly without considering the people around me as my blood pressure rises.

\_\_\_ I have frequent arguments with my spouse which prevents me from getting a good night's rest.

\_\_\_ If my family were asked what was most important to me they would say it's my job, making money. As a result, I fail to get physical exercise.

\_\_\_ I get very anxious every time I lie.

\_\_\_ I have a bad attitude at work and allow tension to build up in me.

\_\_\_ **TOTAL for The BODY**

18–12 Must consider immediate positive intervention for Will improvement!

11–5 Needs some work to improve but fairly balanced.

4–0 Good use of The Will; Congratulations!



## Part 2: Score Interpretation

TOTAL for The WILL \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL for The MIND \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL for The BODY \_\_\_\_\_

Soul-Wellness Total \_\_\_\_\_

### Total All Scores for the Will, The Mind, The Body

54-36 = Soul-Wellness Needs to be integrated and improved! Health may become seriously impaired.

35-17 = Soul-Wellness is almost balanced. Seek improvement in specific areas.

16-0 = Soul-Wellness is highly integrated and you probably have found an enjoyable, meaningful and healthy lifestyle for yourself.

*\*Soul-Wellness Assessment Copyright reserved by Vibrant Life authored by Grant Leitma, 2015*

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## FORGIVENESS IN THE FAMILY

*This article explores some practical ways to teach children about a healthy process of forgiveness and reconciliation. It starts by focusing on understanding God's incredible love and forgiveness for each person and looking at how parents can model forgiveness and set an example for their children. Then it leads the reader through a four-step process of forgiveness that can be taught to children using a variety of simple and creative learning experiences. These steps are:*

- 1. Understanding God's love for each person, even those who have hurt us.*
- 2. Reflecting on the experience of hurt, and how it has affected the person who caused the hurt, as well as the person who has been hurt. This is to develop empathy for each other's feelings.*
- 3. Assessing the damage and considering how important it is to mend the relationship.*
- 4. Developing a relational repair kit to give children the skills to forgive and mend the important relationships in their lives.*

### Overview

Forgiveness can sometimes seem mysterious or complicated, because God's forgiveness is such an incredible gift to us that it's beyond our comprehension. In order to simplify and demystify forgiveness I have developed a simple, four-step process to help explain the process to couples and families. Each of the four steps is accompanied by practical suggestions for helping adults and children to understand the forgiveness process and to put it into action in their everyday lives.

But before we can help our children learn about forgiveness, we need to reflect on what it means to be forgiven by God. We also need to model healthy forgiveness as parents and adults in our children's lives, which includes asking our children for their forgiveness. It is also vital to understand our children's emotional, physical, and relational needs, so that we can support them when

they are struggling and create the optimum context for their positive behavior. Then we are in the best place to notice when they have intentionally disobeyed, and when a healthy apology and forgiveness process will help to mend the hairline cracks and fractures in our relationships with each other and with God.

### Forgiving from the heart of God

The starting place for forgiveness is in the very heart of God, and our understanding of His loving character. When we experience His generous forgiveness towards us, we are inspired to pass that gift onto others. When we forgive another person, we are set free from the desire to take revenge against the person who has hurt or offended us in some way. When it is safe to do so, forgiveness also paves the way towards a closer relationship, as we learn to understand each other better, work to repair

the damage, commit to positive changes in behavior, and lovingly nurture an empathic relationship.

Before we can help our children to understand forgiveness, we need to experience God's amazingly lavish and loving forgiveness for ourselves. It is difficult to convey the wonder of God's gift of grace to others without having this personal and multi-dimensional awareness of His forgiveness in our own lives. God has already given us the gift of forgiveness; we just need to accept it. He longs for us to come to Him and experience the wonderful sense of being washed clean by Him and being given a fresh new start. He takes our sins away and loses them forever, so we don't have to be burdened and dragged down by the things we have done wrong. He wants to make sure there are no obstacles or barriers between us and Him, so that we can truly enter an unhindered, joyful and loving relationship with Him, free from fear, guilt, shame and embarrassment (Psalm 103, Psalm 51, Isaiah 1:18; 43:25; 55:7; Eph. 1:7).

### **Forgiveness in the family**

Once we have experienced the magnitude of God's forgiveness in our own lives, we need to offer it freely to each other, especially in our homes. When we learn how to forgive our spouses well, we set a healthy example for our children. The four-step approach described in this article has helped many couples to navigate the choppy waters of forgiveness in their own relationships, and then with their children.

When parents practice generous grace in their couple relationship, their children can see, hear and understand what healthy forgiveness looks like. And when children experience the powerful forgiveness of their

parents, it helps them to understand something of God's forgiveness and grace too. Solo parents can demonstrate forgiveness with other adults in their life, as well as with their children, to give them a living experience of grace. Every family can also choose to share powerful and inspiring stories of forgiveness with their children, from their own history, and from the incredible stories of forgiveness that are happening around the world.

### **Understanding children's behavior**

Before we consider forgiveness, we also need to understand our children's behavior. It is important to differentiate between their mistakes, accidents, and developmental stages, and their willful and intentional wrongdoings. It is important not to punish or discipline our children for the things that are done because they are too young to understand what they are doing, not yet physically able to manage the task (like knocking over a glass on the table), or too young to assess the risk and understand the consequences of their actions. These are situations of parental responsibility, not children's misdemeanors, and it can be confusing and frightening for them when we expect them to ask for forgiveness when they don't really understand what they have done wrong, and when we may have contributed to their crisis of behavior.

It's also important for us to check that we have met our children's physical and emotional needs. Are they tired, hungry, unwell, frustrated, afraid, confused or overstimulated? And what about our children's relational/bonding needs? Are they longing for some of mom or dad's attention? Do they need a warm hug and some lovely "time in" with us to make them feel connected and

special? Have they been struggling with a difficult task or situation on their own, and they just want us to slow down and help them? Do they feel unsafe for some reason? These powerful experiences can flood a child's system and make it really difficult for them to manage their behavior well. As parents we need to take responsibility for not meeting the child's needs and do everything possible to put things right again.

The time when we do need to think about supporting our children through the four stages of forgiveness is when they have intentionally and willfully disobeyed or crossed a boundary. This is when they most need to accept responsibility for their actions and the hurt that they have caused to others. They also need to accept the responsibility of asking for forgiveness, offering it to others, and repairing their broken relationships.

### **Being a good example**

Another important way that we can help our children learn how to forgive, is by apologizing to them, and asking for their forgiveness, when we have hurt and upset them, intentionally or unintentionally. When we show our willingness to recognize our wrongs, apologize, and ask for our children's forgiveness we set a powerful example for them to follow, and we make it much easier for them to do the same. Some parents are concerned that if they apologize to their children they will be seen as weak; but being able to apologize humbly and lovingly to others, and especially our children, is a sign of great maturity and strength (James 5:16).

Look out for signs that you may have caused hurt to your children. Maybe you shouted at them or responded angrily

instead of patiently (1 Cor. 13:4). Maybe you hurt their tender feelings or shamed them (Rom. 12:10). Maybe you caused them to fear you (1 John 4:18), or you exasperated them (Eph. 6:4). Notice when your child looks sad, goes quiet, hides from you, and gently and warmly ask them if you have hurt them in some way. Bedtime is also a good time to check out if you need to apologize to your child, or if they need to experience your forgiveness for something that they did wrong during the day.

Here is a sample statement of apology that parents can use with their children. "All of us make mistakes, do things that are wrong, and hurt other people. Even parents. Today I hurt you by \_\_\_\_\_. That was wrong. I am so very sorry that I upset you (scared you, hurt you, etc.). Next time I would like to do \_\_\_\_\_ instead. Please forgive me. What can I do now to help you feel better? Would you like a hug, a story, to go for a walk, to do something nice with me?"

### **Repair quickly**

Just as God makes the first move towards us when we have sinned and need forgiveness, so we need to consider making the first move towards our children, of any age, when they need our forgiveness. Teens and children might be uncertain about how to repair the relationship with their parents, so the adults in their lives need to set an example and help them to repair the relationship.

Researchers at Penn University have discovered that when a teenager has been in conflict with a parent, as long as the relationship is restored, and a strong reconnection occurs before bedtime, then the teenager can recover fairly quickly from the event. But, if the relationship is still strained, cold,

and hostile overnight, then the teenager is more likely to feel sad and anxious about what happened, and they may even become depressed<sup>1</sup>. This experience is likely to be similar, or even more intense, in younger children.

### **Start small**

Whenever we begin to learn a new skill, it's best to start small. Helping children to grasp the process of apologizing and offering forgiveness in the little, everyday hurts at home, will help them to develop the skills they can apply to bigger hurts later in life. So, look for good opportunities to help your children practice the skills that are described in this article. Coach them warmly and encourage them on their up and down journey of learning how to ask for, and how to offer forgiveness.

### **Four places of forgiveness for families and children**

One way to illustrate the process of forgiveness, in a way that children can understand, is to think about the hurtful situation from four different places.

1. The first place where we need to experience God's forgiveness is in the very heart of God and His love for each one of us. He loves the person who has caused the hurt as well as the person who has been hurt. It is important for us to understand the generosity of God's loving forgiveness towards each of His children.

2. The second is in each person's shoes, so that we understand the effect of the hurtful experience on each person involved, whether they have been hurt, or whether they have caused the hurt.
3. The third place is where we look at the situation through a magnifying lens—to identify the damage done to the relationship in closer detail, and through a telescopic lens—to look at the future of the relationship.
4. The fourth place is in the mending kit, or the toolbox, where we look for the best way to repair the damage to the relationship.

### **First place—Understanding God's love for everyone**

We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), and, because He loves us, He freely forgives us, so that we can forgive others. In fact, He has already forgiven us, so we can go freely and safely to Him to receive the forgiveness that is already ours. We are forgiven even before we confess our sins, not because we confess our sins.

God loves each person equally. His love for all of His children is not dependent on what they do or don't do. When we have been hurt by someone, God's love is the same for the person who has been hurt and the person who caused the pain.

**Love Hunt**—Work together as a family to find as many objects as you can, in five minutes, that illustrate God's amazing love. Tell each other why you chose your objects, and what they tell you about His love for each one of us.

**Love-shaped Lenses**—Purchase or make a pair of glasses for each person, with heart-

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1. Coffey, J. K., Xia, M., & Fosco, G. M. (2020). When do adolescents feel loved? A daily within-person study of parent-adolescent relations. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000767>



shaped lenses (<https://www.firstpalette.com/printable/eyeglasses-heart.html>). Put on your heart-shaped glasses and imagine that you are looking at every person you see through God's loving eyes, the way He sees each of His children. Talk about what you notice when you look at others with God's love, rather than with your own distorted vision. How can you use these imaginary lenses to help you in the forgiveness process?

**No escaping His love!**—Take a long rope or string and lay it on the ground outside to make the biggest heart shape possible. Tie the two ends together to make a big loop. Have everyone stand inside the heart and tell them that this heart represents God's love. Now ask everyone to hold onto the string as you move around, always keeping everyone inside the loop. Whenever you call out "Love!" work together to lay the rope or string in another big heart. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we are always inside God's circle of love.

**Psalms 103**—Read Psalm 103 together in a version that your children can understand easily. Explore it together so that you are filled with wonder for God's love and generous forgiveness. Ask: Which verse do you like best, and why? What is the most important message in this Psalm for you today? Which verse is most about you? What does this Psalm tell you about God's loving character? Ask younger children to help you create actions for the verses, and older children and teens could work with you to create a video or PowerPoint to illustrate the verses in the psalm.

### **Second place—Understanding ourselves and others**

Once we have grasped God's equally amazing grace towards every person, even

the ones who have hurt us, we are ready to explore the second place. This is the place where we grow to understand more about ourselves and the other person. This can be illustrated by two pairs of shoes, and we ask the questions what am I feeling and needing now, and what is the other person feeling and needing now?

Children often need some help to identify their feelings and needs. Help them by purchasing some cards with emotions written or drawn on them or make a set of your own. Use words like sad, disappointed, hurt, annoyed, angry, afraid, embarrassed, guilty, ashamed, stressed, frustrated, loved, happy, peaceful, etc. Make at least two sets so that your child can choose the words that describe how they are feeling and also choose some words to describe how the other person might be feeling. If you wish, you can actually place the words next to the real shoes of each person involved in the situation.

Then invite your child to think about what they might need to help them feel better, and what the other person might be needing. It is important to remind them that when people are hurting, they are more likely to hurt others, and sometimes we need to use empathy to look beyond their behavior and into their hurting heart and life. As Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," Luke 23:34.

Some of the things that people might need to help them feel better again are:

- Being accepted—especially when they have messed up (Rom. 15:7)
- Experiencing affectionate words and actions (Eph. 4:29, 32)
- Being shown warm and positive attention (Phil. 2:4)
- Being comforted (Rom. 12:15; 2 Cor. 1:3-5)

- Being encouraged (Heb. 10:24)
- Being helped or supported when they are struggling (Gal. 6:2)
- Being respected instead of being shamed (Rom. 12:10)
- Being kept safe when they feel afraid  
(1 John 4:18)

Study these ideas and verses and think about the times when people in the Bible used these ways to mend and build stronger relationships. Jesus used all of these ways to bless people who were hurting, broken, ashamed and guilty. Talk about the times when He related to others in these kind and loving ways, to help them feel forgiven by God.

### **Third place—Taking a good look at the relationship**

Once we have spent time reminding ourselves of God’s love for each person and exploring the effect of the hurtful action on each person involved, it’s important to look at the relationship through a kind of magnifying glass, to assess the damage in detail. Once we understand the harm that has been done, we can then look at the relationship through a kind of “time-telescope” and think about the kind of relationship we want to have together in the future. These two perspectives help us to understand what has been broken, and what we might need to do to repair the damage so that we can keep our precious, long-term relationships well-maintained. It may also help us to see which relationships need to have clearer boundaries, so that people are protected from future abuse.

### **The close-up view**

By looking at the hurt through a kind of relational magnifying glass we can

identify the type and extent of the damage and understand how to help mend the situation. Understanding the emotions of each person, and their relational needs, can give us some strong clues about what needs mending. Sadness needs to be heard and comforted. Losses and breakages need to be restored. Anger and frustration need to be heard, acknowledged and resolved where possible. Someone who is stressed and struggling may need practical help and support. Someone who feels ashamed and embarrassed by their behavior may need to know that they are still loved and valued. Each person might look at their emotional and relational needs and describe what they need that might help them right now, and also strengthen the relationship.

### **What about abuse?**

If a detailed look at the hurtful situation identifies a very painful abuse or broken situation, the safest long-term perspective may be to set some very clear boundaries on the relationship so that this cannot happen again. Our children need to know that forgiveness does not mean that they have to remain in an unsafe relationship with someone who has hurt them badly, whether the hurt was emotional, physical, sexual or spiritual. Sometimes an abuser will demand instant forgiveness and reconciliation, but this is a form of spiritual abuse which can make the victim even more vulnerable. One helpful response might be, “You have hurt me very badly. I am in the process of forgiving you, but the effect of your painful and abusive actions will take time to heal. You have broken my heart and my trust, and they will take much longer to mend than a broken bone. I have carefully and wisely chosen to keep myself safe from further

hurt by creating a safe boundary between us by \_\_\_\_\_. Please will you do your part by respecting this boundary.”

### **The long-distance view**

The long-distance, “time-telescope” perspective helps us to understand how important it is to repair the relationship. For example, if a complete stranger does something very annoying or hurtful or rude, we can forgive them in our hearts and leave it there. We do not need to have an ongoing relationship with them, and we will not see them again. The long-distance view reminds us that there may not be much we can do to repair that kind of relationship. But maybe we can bless them in spite of their behavior, such as by smiling, saying something warm and forgiving, or doing something unexpectedly kind for them. After all, we don’t know what they are experiencing in their lives right now, and it is very possible that their unacceptable and offensive behavior comes from some kind of painful brokenness and aloneness in their life. Our act of kindness and might give them hope or a glimpse into God’s love for them.

Create some simple scenarios of hurts that might happen in a brief encounter with a stranger. Think of some different ways that you and your children could respond to the situation with love and kindness, even when people are angry, unreasonable and disrespectful. If this happens in real life make sure that you keep yourselves safe, but also look for ways that you might be a blessing to the person.

When we have looked at the relationship that has been hurt, and we have identified it as a relationship that is precious to us, and one we want to have for many years to come, then we need to make sure that we do

a very good repair job. This involves learning more about what each other finds hurtful, so that those situations can be avoided. It’s also important to learn what heals the relationship well after a hurt, because everyone is different, and we all need different tools to repair our hearts and our relationships. This needs warm and loving conversations, where each person is able to talk about their fears, their hopes for the relationship, and the things that help to heal their feelings. This takes us to the fourth place.

### **Fourth place—Understanding how to repair a broken a relationship**

It’s not always easy to find the words to talk about our hurts and needs, and to make a good apology. It can be useful to have a basic model which can be adapted to each person and situation. Here is a clear and simple way to express how you have been hurt by the other person’s behavior, without causing further hurt to the relationship:

“When this \_\_\_\_\_ (be specific) happened I felt \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_. Next time it would be really helpful if you could do \_\_\_\_\_ (be specific) instead.”

It can be useful to write this out and fill in the blanks. The message can be said aloud, read to the person, or written in a letter.

Here is a clear and simple way to express an apology, without being defensive.

“I am so sorry that I hurt you by \_\_\_\_\_ (be specific). I caused you to feel \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. That was very wrong of me. I was inconsiderate and unkind (reword if necessary). I am very sorry that what I did made you feel \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. I really want to learn from my mistakes. Next time I want to do

\_\_\_\_\_ instead. When you are ready, I would like you to forgive me and help me to understand how I can put things right.”

### **Relational Repair kit**

Most homes have a toolbox or sewing kit, filled with things that can be used to mend and repair clothes and other household items. Just as we need to repair our belongings from time to time, we also need to repair our relationships. Talk about some of the repairs that you have made around the home, and to your clothes. Show your children what you did and talk about what was challenging, what you learned, and why you are happy that you repaired the item and didn't just throw it away.

Cut cardstock into the shapes of different tools, such as a hammer, a tube of glue, a large reel of thread, a wrench, etc. Make the shapes chunky so you can write on them. Then talk about some of the different ways you can repair a relationship when someone has been hurt. Write each idea on a different tool. Talk about them and practice different ways to put them into action. Add extra ideas of your own that you have found helpful in your life.

- Talk things through calmly (Prov. 15:1)
- Listen well to the other person (James 1:19)
- Make a good apology, using the outline given in the previous section
- Do something kind for the other person (1 Cor. 13:4)
- Fix what was broken or replace what was lost
- Write a kind note or card, or give a small gift (Prov. 18:16)
- Ask the person you have hurt how you can help them (Gal. 6:2)

- If you have said something bad about a person to others, go to those people, apologize and tell them good things instead
- Promise to change your behavior and not hurt them in that way again (Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12)
- Express how much you love/care for the other person

### **How to use the repair tool cards**

- Shuffle the repair tools and place them face down on the table. Take it in turns to pick one up and describe a situation when you might use that repair tool.
- Or write some appropriate and familiar scenarios on separate blank cards. Turn these over and take it in turns to pick one scenario card and one repair card. Discuss whether the repair would be appropriate for the situation, how you might put that repair idea into practice in that context, and what else you could do in that situation that might be helpful.
- Make a poster of the repair ideas and add more when you think of them. These can remind your family to keep their relationships in good repair.
- Family activities and prayers to help children understand and experience God's forgiveness

God's forgiveness can be a difficult concept to comprehend, particularly when people have a damaged sense of self-worth. I have met lifelong Adventists in their eighties who still struggle to believe that God has forgiven them for a mistake they made when they were a teenager. Even though we can tell

people that God has forgiven them, some people need to have visual and tangible illustrations to help them understand the completeness of God's forgiveness. Here are a few tried and tested object lessons that explore forgiveness.

**Bubbles**—One way to help children understand God's forgiveness is by using a tub of blowing bubbles. Invite your child to blow some bubbles into the air, then close their eyes to pray for forgiveness for a specific thing that they have done. When they open their eyes, the bubbles will have completely disappeared. The bubbles can never be found again or returned to the tub. It is as if they have never existed and they have now completely disappeared forever.

**Disappearing ink pen**—Another way to illustrate how completely God forgives us is to use a special fabric marking pen that disappears in water. These can be found in fabric and sewing stores. Cut a scrap of white fabric or white paper towel. Let your child write a word, make a mark, or sketch a picture on the fabric to represent what needs to be forgiven. Place a small bowl of water on the table. Ask your child to hold the fabric in their hand, and then drop it into the water. Make sure that the fabric is submerged whilst your child prays for forgiveness. When they open their eyes, the fabric or paper towel will be completely white again and the mark will have disappeared.

**Drawing in salt**—Another simple forgiveness prayer activity uses a deep baking pan, and some free-running table salt or fine, dry sand. Pour a layer of salt or sand into the pan until it is about 1" or 2cm deep. Tilt the pan from side to side to check that the salt or sand will flow around freely and quickly. Use a finger to write a word

or draw a symbol in the salt or sand to illustrate the "sin" that needs to be forgiven. Then close the eyes to pray, whilst gently swirling the pan of salt. When the prayer is finished, the marks will have completely disappeared into the salt and they can never be found again.

### **Keep telling positive stories of forgiveness**

As a family, talk about positive stories of forgiveness. Look at the stories of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21-35). Also explore Jesus' forgiveness of the people who killed him, the thief on the cross, and Peter, after he denied Jesus.

Tell your own stories of people who have forgiven you, and what that meant to you. Or how you learnt to forgive others, and the difference it has made to your life. If you can't think of a personal story, think about something you need to apologize for, or someone you need to forgive, and put your learning into action. You could even invite your children to pray for you as go through this process of reconciliation. Even though we might feel vulnerable, we will be setting our children a powerful example.

"The Forgiveness Project" (<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com>) is a charity that wants to help people understand the powerful significance of forgiveness. It has dozens of real-life stories of forgiveness in the world today that have taken place in extremely challenging circumstances. These are especially valuable for sharing with older children and teenagers. The website also has teaching resources, videos, a podcast

series that explores different aspects of forgiveness, and a toolbox for exploring forgiveness in challenging contexts.

### **Forgiveness as a life skill**

The skills needed to forgive others and apologize well are important life skills for every person, and especially for Christians. Keep studying God's loving and learning about His forgiving character, and talk about your experiences of His love and grace. Keep practicing, modelling and using the skills as a family so that they become second nature. These skills will help you and your children to become good peacemakers in their families and communities, people who will be called "children of God" (Matt. 5:9).



## THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS AFTER MY LIFE OF ABUSE

*The role of forgiveness after my life of abuse has multiplier affects and effects: it plays the part on regeneration, finding our true self and our voice, and promotes dignity. Forgiving can be hard but unforgiveness can be even more detrimental. Forgiveness is an active, conscious, and deliberate process of letting go of the person who harms us without which, we will continue to suffer from the lack of peace, resignation, and isolation. Forgiveness can lessen its grip and free us from their control. It stops victim mentality. Forgiveness can deepen our growth and healing. Forgiveness can reduce our psychosomatic symptoms. Forgiveness can also not be done alone. Forgiveness can redeem and break intergenerational trauma cycle and stop hiding our family secrets of guilt and shame with unconditional love from both God and community support. Forgiveness contributes to greater empathy, acceptance, altruism, and love despite marginalization, and it may bring about reconciliation and resolution within and without.*

*Then said Jesus,  
Father, forgive them;  
for they know not what they do.  
Luke 23:34 KJV*

Divorce is still somewhat a taboo in Singapore where standing up for oneself is unthinkable for a traditional Chinese family. I am a fifty-year-old Asian single mother. I survived my abuse from my family of origin and later during my marriage which ended some thirteen years back. One of the positive outcomes of this lifetime of trauma is that I am now a trauma survivor and providentially a counselor for the last nine years. My recovery work supports others in their intergenerational trauma. The role of forgiveness after my life of abuse helps me and others find our authentic identities and personal voices.

### **First Experience with Abuse**

My mother used to work in the military which perhaps explains her authoritarian style. When I was a young girl, I used to daydream quite a bit to chill out and at times to escape reality. I was easily fascinated by surrounding sights and sounds like the falling rain, so my mother thought that I was deliberately not responding to her when she called. In response, she would use a cane (in other parts of the world parents used to use twigs from trees) repeatedly on my legs for “disobedience” without allowing me the opportunity to clarify what I was doing.

I recall another time when my mother's fingernails scratched me across my face when I failed to board the bus properly because I got distracted on the street. My dad was disturbed by her treatment of me and suggested to my mother that she at least not hit my face where she could leave scars.

During my teenage years, my mother threatened me with an iron during one of her moments of rage. I was shocked at the intensity of her anger and ran away to avoid further punishment. I often wondered why my mother was so angry at me. What caused her to lose control like that? What was her side of her story? Did something happen in her past that I do not know? Is it all linked to her present behavior? I was curious but I never went any further than that to try to find out.

Meanwhile, my dad was silent throughout all this time. He did not show up, stand up for me, or even try to defend me. I have learned since that his own mother was abused by her husband. I wondered what he was thinking at that time. I thought the abuse would come to an end, but I was wrong.

Many years later, as I was going through my divorce, my mother was very upset and did not agree with it. I was a thirty-eight-year-old soon-to-be single mother with a two year-old daughter. My mother hit me on my face and head in front of my young daughter during a meal to knock some sense into me. Her fit of anger landed me in the hospital. The hospital refused to discharge me unless someone came to take me home. I was taking a class for the master's degree in counseling and had to make a presentation the next day. I was so desperate that I was willing to show up at class with the bruises and scars on my face my mother

had inflicted. Thank God my lecturer and classmates were very kind, understanding, and accepting of my predicament.

While growing up in church, no one knew I was the subject of abuse because we are not supposed to talk about such shameful family secrets. It would be deemed a family betrayal. Sadly, this was how my church came to know about the family abuse that had taken place some thirty years earlier.

I was not the only one who suffered from my mother. My brother was also abused by my "tiger" mother in his childhood. He was badly caned continuously for his studies and for being naughty. I would just hear him scream, shout, and cry with fear as I hid in my room helplessly unable to intervene. I was devastated that I could not save him. I just hid and heard him suffer while I kept silent. I still feel guilty that I was a bystander witness. I felt I let him down as a sister. I have come to realize that it was important, and necessary, for me to forgive myself for my perception of having abandoned him. I know I cannot change what I thought was a failure on my part, but by becoming the caregiver of my father I feel that I can at least help my brother so he does not have to bear the burden of caring for our dad.

I have been asked at times why I never said anything. I did not share with anybody because I did not know how to share or even where to begin. There are times when I still feel that his abuse was my fault. I battle with self-doubt, guilt, and shame of how bad I must be as a daughter for my mother to hate me so much. But I also thought, if I let it out, people around me will condemn me further. In a way that people who have never been abused do not understand, my

mother used her emotional blackmailing and intimidation to keep me quiet.

I have also learned that my maternal second aunt was abused by her husband in his possessiveness and control. In other words, I had both parental family histories of abusive marriages and families. It was only when my young daughter became a bystander witnessing me as her mother being abused at the hand of her maternal grandmother, that I knew in my heart that this was not normal. My friends were shocked at seeing my injuries. How much more vicious could it get?

### **Second Experience with Abuse**

My ex-husband came from a very broken home, too. He had a lot of rage inside, but in my youth and naivete I was unable to see it. My maternal grandmother was worried for me. She warned me about his controlling nature with my time and space. He appeared gentlemanly stoic, serious, responsible, conflict-avoiding, and distant. Of course, these turned into stonewalling later which made my marriage lonelier than being single. I assumed that he was a quiet man like my peace-keeping father. But I was mistaken as my ex-husband later misrepresented me to my children and my community with his lies. He sowed discord to alienate me from my family and friends. He controlled and manipulated me by maliciously undermining me.

Suffering through emotional, mental, and verbal abuse by both my mother and ex-husband made me feel useless and worthless. I was told I was a LIABILITY, and that I amounted to nothing. I came to a point of being suicidal at the age of thirty-seven. I was trying so hard to bring everyone together, and yet I felt that nobody loved me,

including my numbed thirteen-year-old son. I was so heartbroken and devastated when he chose to stay with his father because I had no cash, no career, no condominium, no credit card, and no membership in a country club. They called these the five Cs in Singapore. I thought to myself, "How is he going to survive without me?" He forgot that I had to start my life all over again after taking care of him all his life. I was very hurt. I had no other choice and yet he was upset that I "abandoned" him with his sister for my well-being. It took me a long time to forgive myself. I love my son deeply and miss him all these years we have been apart. I know that it is not going to be easy for him to understand what I have gone through. Both my mother and ex-husband gaslighted me due to their parentage. What that means is that both of them undermined me by denying the facts, what they had done to me, or my feelings, and manipulated my cognition, my emotions, and who I was fundamentally as a person by lying about me. Sadly, I only knew this after leaving them behind.

Like many other victims of abuse, I tried to return home seven times. Each time, I could not stay for more than two weeks in a row. The last straw was the morning when my ex-husband uttered expletives, like a machine gun, finding fault with me. Jaded and tired, I could see his blabbering lips but could hear anything as I shut down, shut up, and shut off. I knew there was no point in staying any longer just to be so deflated for no good reason.

### **Leaving the Abusive Past for a Healthy Future**

My family friend brought my daughter and I out for the last time. On our way to his

family home, I kept asking “WHY?” Finally, he uttered “THERE IS NO ANSWER.” It was so hard to accept this! At least, at last, I was with this family who understood my situation. I was a runaway wife, mother, sister, daughter, aunt, and friend. Kind people from the international and local community came to sponsor and support me as a single mom with a young daughter. They provided us shelter, food, clothes, toys, education, money, legal counsel, counselling, and part-time work to help me survive the seven years of an acrimonious divorce process. But I finally found work after graduation and became financially independent.

More than a decade after my divorce, my dad became homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic. When his health, wellbeing, and eyesight deteriorated, we had to get a helper. With the quarantine and shut down, I was able to work from home. I became my dad’s main caregiver for his trauma, depression, anxiety, and ill health. He told me he felt guilty and ashamed for not being there for me during my difficult times and here I was now taking care of him.

Now, at the age of seventy-five, after staying with me for about a year, he has recovered from his chronic condition, is living an Adventist lifestyle, and has had more peace. God promised in *Psalms 103:3* that forgiveness and letting go can actually heal us from all kinds of illnesses:

*Who forgiveth all thine iniquities;  
who healeth all thy diseases;  
Psalms 103:3 (KJV)*

The most challenging part for me of the abusive relationships was my own self-harm and self-loathing. I experienced this void and felt that there was nobody to love me unconditionally. In fact, I felt that I did not even deserve to be loved. It was

agonizingly and excruciatingly sad as I battled constantly with the thought, “what is wrong with me?” This extreme loneliness was hard to bear if it were not for Jesus’ love for me which made me free! I would have been truly lost in my wilderness, wandering aimlessly, without end.

Interestingly, for me it was easier to forgive others than forgiving myself. I know what the bible teaches about forgiving others. We can unlock the unsearchable riches of God’s grace, as the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1:7, when we forgive while we are being forgiven. But forgiveness also protects us from further harm. We stop bearing grudges, resentment, and bitterness. The option, unforgiveness, will lead us to be eaten up from within.

For years, I thought that it was my mother that made me feel this way but then I realized that perhaps my son felt the same way toward me. When I realized that, I was devastated. Though circumstantially different, perhaps I had treated my son like my mother treated me. I asked myself, “What did I do wrong?” I must wait for my son to forgive me emotionally one day, in God’s time. I wrote a poem recently depicting my struggle with self-forgiveness.

### ***Forgiveness***

*Love your enemies,  
Do good to them which hate you,  
Bless them that curse you,  
And pray for them  
Which despitefully use you.  
Luke 6:27-28 KJV*

*So hard  
Thinking that forgiving others is hard  
But harder still  
So hard  
So hard to let go  
So hard to forgive myself was worst*

*The struggle is real  
That I allow it  
That I was so foolish  
To believe my own lies  
All these times*

*I forgive myself  
I forgive myself  
I forgive me  
Ultimately  
God forgives me too!  
I had no better choices but to leave...  
How, Lord?  
Please forgive me!*

*Unless  
I know that I have done my best  
I cannot turn back the clock  
I have already lost all*

*I try to make it up for whatever  
My guilt  
My shame  
My faults  
My mistakes  
My failures  
I can only  
Go forward  
Look forward  
Pay forward  
Move forward*

*I don't want others  
To live my miserable life anymore  
I can look deep within me  
Who I am inside, the real me!*

*Therefore  
If thine enemy hunger, feed him;  
If he thirst, give him drink:  
For in so doing  
Thou shalt  
Heap coals of fire  
On his head.  
Be not overcome of evil,  
But overcome evil with good.  
Romans 12:20-21 KJV*

*To find  
The well of unquenching  
Fountain spring of wounded healers  
Instead of hurts and pain  
To offer compassion  
To offer empathy  
To offer presence  
To offer support  
To offer fellowship of suffering of pain  
To offer I have been there  
And done that too  
To offer insights the next right thing  
Maybe just for  
Only one second more  
Lifted  
Uplifted  
Give Back  
One step next  
Better than none at all...to Self Shaping  
Jesus paid it all!*

*Brethren, I count not myself  
To have apprehended:  
But this one thing I do,  
Forgetting those things  
Which are behind,  
And reaching forth unto those things  
Which are before  
Philippians 3:13*

## Strength in Bible Promises

During some of the darkest moments of my crisis, a Christian lady often repeated the words, “Love Mercy” for greater good. I was reminded of the experience of Joseph in Genesis 50:15-2. In spite of the pain he had suffered at the hands of those closest to him, Joseph forgave and took care of his betraying brothers and their children. In fact, Joseph’s forgiveness and his care impacted generations of Israelites after his father died in Egypt.

Likewise, King David forgave King Saul for making him live like a fugitive for years, yet he took good care of Saul’s grandson, Mephibosheth, after both Saul and Jonathan died in the battlefield.

The experience of these men, and their families, has taught me that when I forgive not only do I benefit myself, but others reap the rewards as well. I think my all-time favorite verse, and one which has anchored me to my faith throughout is *Romans 8:28 (KJV)* “*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*” Many thoughts coursed through my mind, telling me, “It is God’s will,” I may not understand right now why. But other thoughts also reminded me, “Be still and know that He is God” and “Let your Light, continue to Shine!” Other words from scripture have held me up when I felt as if I were falling. I had these assuring verses that kept me holding on:

*And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
Matthew 6:12 KJV*

*Then came Peter to him, and said,  
Lord, how oft shall my brother sin  
against me,  
and I forgive him? till seven times?*

*Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee,  
Until seven times:  
but, Until seventy times seven.  
Matthew 18:21-22 KJV*

*Wherefore I say unto thee,  
Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for  
she loved much:  
but to whom little is forgiven, the same  
loveth little.  
Luke 7:47 KJV*

When you think of it, Jesus forgave Mary but also condemned the unworthy host. Jesus granted this woman the privilege of anointing His feet with her extravagant alabaster jar of fragrance before His crucifixion. She was aware that she was deeply forgiven and loved by God. And she loved Him back! Love deepens with greater recognition and reception of His grace and mercy for us. I embraced this and accepted His love and forgiveness as my own!

## From Abuse to Forgiveness

So, what should I do now? Everett Worthington (2021), professor Emeritus at Virginia Commonwealth University, offers a model for forgiveness using the acronym REACH. Forgiving others means we can Recall the hurt objectively without expecting and demanding payback and thus respecting the dignity of the person. It also involves Empathizing with others’ struggle and loving them in turn, which results in our healing. Then taking this Altruism, paying it forward, investing and role modeling in others’ lives. The next ingredient is to Commit to make the forgiveness lasting by writing out a statement of why you forgive the person who hurt you this way because. Finally, Holding on to the meaning



of forgiveness brings us to experience it emotionally.

The role of forgiveness after my life of abuse is that I experience a regeneration with greater empathy and altruism for others. According to the Worthington's (2021) Reach Model, and the words of Jesus in Luke 23:34, empathizing with my mother and ex-husband because "they know not what they do" has helped me to move on rather than getting stuck in my life. In addition, I can give back in altruism in my present work.

Worthington (2021) identified two types of forgiveness: emotional and decisional. On one hand, my emotional forgiveness has a process across time. "Emotional forgiveness" involves replacing the negative emotions with positive feelings like compassion, sympathy, and empathy. Research shows that emotional forgiveness has the most health benefits. This forgiveness can reduce our stressful reaction to the transgression. Stress can lead to a suppressed immune system and an increased risk for cardiovascular issues. But emotional forgiveness can also keep us from harmful ruminating over the wrong that was done to us. This rumination over the wrongs perpetrated toward us has been associated with mental health problems, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, and depression. During COVID-19 in 2020, when I forgave myself emotionally in a deeper sense, I noticed that I stopped coughing psychosomatically. Today, I am also able to speak more comfortable than before.

Decisional forgiveness appears to be more a left-brain function while emotional forgiveness is a right brain one. Therefore, as Mela (2020) explains, when the mind or the brain is demanding the conscious attention be focused on the injury, it leads to an

important growth through the re-conceptualization of the self attributes. This pain can signal a turn off to suppress concepts and memories which can lead to regression instead of regeneration.

Decisional forgiveness, on the other hand, involves deciding to forgive a personal offense and letting go of angry and resentful thoughts and feelings toward the person who has wronged you. Decisional forgiveness is important in repairing and reconciling relationships. For me, it just helps me in self-reconciliation, in part because both my mother and ex-husband are obstinate through denial and blaming projections. I have come to understand that both are controlling and exhibit narcissistic tendencies, but they also mask their deep hidden inferiorities, childhood injuries, and shame with superiority complexes. I know that it is hard for them to change their nature and there is no way to turn back the clock. I have come to accept that it is not worth begrudging them further by my unforgiveness. It is vanity and futility. I just wanted to end my own pain. I wanted my peace. I just wanted to be free to find my passion and calling. I had wasted enough time thus far.

It was important for me to accept that while I forgave them, I do not need to stay physically with them and allow them to continue their abuses. I left them in God's hand. I know that God will be my equity and I trust God to be my provider, my source of strength, my refuge, and my shelter! As a result, my self-trust returned gradually.

In conclusion, my only possible wish is that no one ever live through my kind of life. If I can pre-empt others, then I can re-channel and use my pain as my life work to help similar others to live better

and more meaningful lives. This is a higher calling! The Bible says, LOVE our enemies, pray for them who spitefully use you and bless them who curse you (Mat 5:44). To do this, forgiving myself is paramount to leaving behind my years of self-abandonment, self-blame, self-oppression, torment, and torture. I must confess that it was hard for a while to do that! I wondered why I was so stupid and how I had become so timid. It was when I found God's amazing grace, His justice and mercy, that my chains were finally gone from my own inner imprisonment. God has this amazing rescue plan for me, a brand plucked out from the fire! My alabaster jar of fragrance was chosen to break the vicious cycle of family intergenerational rage and it is described in the verses below:

*The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.*  
*Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.*  
*Numbers 14:18-19 KJV*

## References

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*Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them:*  
*for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;*  
*And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*  
*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain;*  
*for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.*  
*Exodus 20:5-7 KJV*

The hand of God is mysterious indeed! He can right all wrongs! My special friend once shared with me that I can only complete my emotional forgiveness if both my mother and ex-husband would realize and apologize to me one day for their wrongdoing and ask me to forgive them. While I do acknowledge my apology language is the abovementioned, I also know, being human, that it may never happen. I can accept this. I would not be able to come this far without the love of God and the community support. I couldn't do this alone, and at the end, I realize now that I was never alone.





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