

A close-up photograph of a woman with voluminous, curly reddish-brown hair. She is smiling gently with her eyes closed, embracing another person whose dark, curly hair is visible on the right. The woman is wearing a light-colored t-shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a brick wall and some greenery under a soft, overcast sky.

HOW TO *forgive*

WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE IT

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*"For everything that was written
in the past was written to teach us,
so that through the endurance
taught in the Scriptures and
the encouragement they provide
we might have hope."*

(ROMANS 15:4)

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FORGIVENESS

Releasing You Is Freeing Me

What Is God's Heart on Forgiveness?

The thought of forgiving the person who hurt you (or your loved ones) can seem unthinkable, unfair, and unequivocally wrong. For many, the pain is just too real. However, forgiveness is at the heart of God's character. It's why Jesus came. And it's at the heart of healing, growth, and freedom.

Choosing to forgive is not about letting the other person "off the hook" or ignoring the pain and damage that's been done. It's about walking in God's grace, living in freedom, and moving forward with hope.

A good way to think about forgiveness is to imagine letting go of the offense by *releasing* your offender. When you don't forgive, it's like holding on to bitterness, holding on to the pain, and holding on to the offender. When you forgive, you release your resentment, your pain, and your offender into the hands of God.

Forgiveness is difficult, but it is possible by God's grace. His grace helps you heal from past wounds and empowers you to forgive. So when you find yourself struggling to forgive, reflect on God's grace and He will help you walk in the freedom of forgiveness.

*"Let us then approach God's throne
of grace with confidence,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace
to help us in our time of need."
(HEBREWS 4:16)*

God wants us to forgive each other because He has forgiven us.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (EPHESIANS 4:32).

God wants us to forgive others in the same way He forgives us.

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (COLOSSIANS 3:13).

God wants us to see unforgiveness as sin.

"If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (JAMES 4:17).

God wants us to get rid of unforgiveness and have a heart of mercy.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (MATTHEW 5:7).

God wants us to do our part to live in peace with everyone.

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (ROMANS 12:18).

God wants us to overcome evil with good.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (ROMANS 12:21).

God wants us to be ministers of reconciliation.

"God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 CORINTHIANS 5:18–19).

God wants us to forgive others so we will not become bitter.

“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (HEBREWS 12:15).

God wants us to forgive others so we will accurately reflect the character of Jesus.

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (EPHESIANS 5:1–2).

What Is Forgiveness *Not*?

Misconceptions abound when the word *forgiveness* is mentioned. Some think forgiveness is the equivalent of *excusing* sin, saying that what was wrong is now right. Yet this is not the example of forgiveness Jesus displayed. When He encountered the mob of men eager to stone a woman caught in adultery, He chose not to stone her. However, neither did He *excuse* her sin. Instead, He said, *“Go, and sin no more”* (John 8:11 KJV). To help correct any confusion about what forgiveness *is*, you need to know what forgiveness is *not*!

*“Let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance.”
(PROVERBS 1:5)*

Forgiveness is not circumventing God’s justice.

- It is allowing God to execute His justice in His time and in His way.

Forgiveness is not waiting for “time to heal all wounds.”

- It is clear that time doesn’t always heal wounds; some people will not allow healing.

Forgiveness is not letting the guilty “off the hook.”

- It is moving the guilty from your hook to God’s hook.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.

- It takes two to reconcile, but it takes only one to forgive.

Forgiveness is not excusing wrong behavior.

- It is acknowledging that wrong behavior is without excuse, while still forgiving.

Forgiveness is not explaining away the hurt.

- It is working through the hurt.

Forgiveness is not based on what is fair.

- It was not “fair” for Jesus to hang on the cross—but He did so that we could be forgiven.

Forgiveness is not being weak.

- It is being strong enough to be Christlike.

Forgiveness is not stuffing your anger.

- It is resolving your anger by releasing the offense to God.

Forgiveness is not a natural response.

- It is a supernatural response, empowered by God.

Forgiveness is not denying the hurt.

- It is feeling the hurt and releasing it to God.

Forgiveness is not being a doormat.

- It is seeing that, if this were so, Jesus would have been the greatest “doormat” of all!

Forgiveness is not conditional.

- It is unconditional, a mandate from God to everyone.

Forgiveness is not forgetting.

- It is necessary to remember before you can forgive.

Forgiveness is not a feeling.

- It is a choice—an act of the will.

Is Forgiveness the Same as Reconciliation?

No. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. *Forgiveness* focuses on the *offense*; *reconciliation* focuses on the *relationship*. Forgiveness requires no relationship. However, reconciliation requires a relationship in which two people, in agreement, are walking together toward the same goal. The Bible says . . .

“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”

(AMOS 3:3)

Forgiveness can take place with only one person.

- **Reconciliation** requires at least two people.

Forgiveness is directed one-way.

- **Reconciliation** is reciprocal, occurring two ways.

Forgiveness is a decision to release the offender.

- **Reconciliation** is the effort to rejoin the offender.

Forgiveness involves a change in thinking about the offender.

- **Reconciliation** involves a change in behavior by the offender.

Forgiveness is a free gift to the one who has broken trust.

- **Reconciliation** is a restored relationship based on restored trust.

Forgiveness is extended even if it is never, ever earned.

- **Reconciliation** is offered to the offender because it has been earned.

Forgiveness is unconditional, regardless of a lack of repentance.

- **Reconciliation** is conditional, based on repentance.

Key Verse to Memorize

*“Bear with each other and forgive one another
if any of you has a grievance against someone.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”
(COLOSSIANS 3:13)*

Key Passage to Read

Matthew 18:23–35

What Are the Four Stages of Forgiveness?

Have you ever noticed that the word *forgiveness* has the word *give* in it? When you choose to forgive, you give someone a gift—the gift of freedom from having to pay the penalty for offending you, the gift of dismissing the debt owed to you. Because this can be a difficult gift to give, you may need to travel through four stages of forgiveness. Realize that you are also giving yourself a gift—the gift of grudge-free living. That is true freedom.

*“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone
among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.”
(LEVITICUS 19:18)*

1. Face the Offense.

When you feel pain that is personal, unfair, and deep, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you. First you must face the truth of what has actually been done and not hinder true healing by rationalizing or focusing on false thinking.

- **Don’t minimize the offense** by thinking: “No matter how badly he treats me, it’s okay.”

Truth: Bad treatment is not okay. There is no excuse for bad treatment of any kind—any time.

“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (EPHESIANS 5:11).

- **Don’t excuse the offender’s behavior** by thinking: “He doesn’t mean to hurt me. I shouldn’t feel upset with him—he’s a member of my family!”

Truth: No matter the age of the offender or our relationship, we need to call sin “sin.” We need to face the truth instead of trying to change it. There must first be a *guilty* party in order to have someone to forgive.

“Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent,’ will be cursed by peoples” (PROVERBS 24:24).

- **Don’t assume that quick forgiveness is full forgiveness** by thinking: “As soon as that horrendous ordeal occurred, I quickly and fully forgave him. That’s what I’ve been taught to do.”

Truth: Many well-intentioned people feel guilty if they don’t extend immediate forgiveness so they “forgive” quickly. Yet they have neither faced the full impact of the offense nor grieved over what actually happened.

Rarely is the full impact of sin felt at the moment it occurs. Rather, its impact is felt at different levels over a period of time. Therefore, forgiveness needs to be extended at each of these levels.

“Quick forgiveness” over deep hurts may seem sufficient, but it may not be “full forgiveness”—not until it has been extended at each level of impact. Before complete forgiveness can be extended, you must face the truth about the gravity of the offense and its extended impact on you.

“You [God] desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place” (PSALM 51:6).

2. Feel the Offense.

We usually do not hate strangers or acquaintances; we just get angry with them when we think we’ve been wronged by them. But author and theologian Lewis Smedes writes, “When a person destroys what our commitment and our intimacy created, something precious is destroyed.” Then anger or even hatred may be our true feeling in response to deep, unfair pain. Hatred toward an offender needs to be brought up out of the basement of our souls and dealt with. However, not all hatred is wrong. For example, God *hates* evil, and we should too.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens . . . a time to love and a time to hate” (ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 8).

Failing to feel the offense results in . . .

- **Denying your pain:** “I don’t blame her for always criticizing me. She is under a lot of pressure. And besides, it doesn’t hurt me.”

Truth: Being mistreated by someone you love is painful. Feeling the pain must take place before healing can occur.

“The LORD is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (PSALM 34:18).

- **Carrying false guilt:** “I feel guilty if I hate what was done to me. I’m never supposed to have hatred.”

Truth: God hates sin. You, too, can hate sin. You are to hate the sin but not the sinner.

“To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech” (PROVERBS 8:13).

3. Forgive the Offender.

“To err is human, to forgive, divine.” This famous quote by English poet Alexander Pope is a heavenly reminder to all of us. However, the earthly reality is more like this: “To err is human, to blame it on someone else is more human!”

Oh, how much easier it is to blame than to forgive. But we are called by God to forgive! When you do forgive, genuine forgiveness draws you into the heart of God, and your life takes on the divine character of Christ.

- **Argument:** “I don’t think it is right to forgive when I don’t feel like forgiving.”

Answer: Forgiveness is not a feeling, but is rather an act of the will—a choice. Jesus established what was right when He said . . .

“When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (MARK 11:25).

- **Argument:** “I can forgive everyone else, but I don’t have the power to forgive that person.”

Answer: The issue is not your lack of power to forgive, but rather how strong God’s power is within you to forgive any sin committed against you.

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 PETER 1:3).

- **Argument:** “Forgiveness isn’t fair. She ought to pay for what she did!”

Answer: God knows how to deal with each person fairly—and He will, in His own time.

“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (ROMANS 12:19).

- **Argument:** “I have forgiven, but it doesn’t do any good. He keeps doing the same thing over and over.”
Answer: You cannot control what others do, but you can control *how you respond* to what others do. Jesus said you are to respond with forgiveness no matter the number of times wronged. The apostle Peter asked Jesus,
“‘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’” (MATTHEW 18:21–22).
- **Argument:** “I cannot forgive and forget. I keep thinking about being hurt.”
Answer: When you choose to forgive, you don’t get a case of “holy amnesia.” However, after facing the hurt and confronting the offender, close off your mind to rehearsing the pain of the past. Forget about your pain by refusing to focus on your hurt.
“I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14).

4. Find Oneness—If Appropriate.

Relationships filled with resentment ultimately perish. Relationships filled with forgiveness ultimately prevail. However, reconciliation in a relationship—the restoration of oneness—is contingent on several vital factors. When these conditions are met, and when both parties are committed to *honesty* in the relationship, there is real hope that the two can be of one mind and one heart again. The Bible says . . .

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (PHILIPPIANS 2:1–2).

Note: Situations where reconciliation is *not* appropriate include: a physically abusive relationship, an adulterous affair, rape, murder, or even spiritual abuse. For *some* offenses, reconciliation may not be wise or safe. In these instances, seek God’s direction in the decisions you make beyond forgiveness by reading His Word, praying, and talking with a pastor, counselor, or trusted Christian friend about the situation and how best to proceed.

How to Truly Forgive

Have you ever said, “I was severely wronged by someone I once trusted. People tell me I should forgive, but how can I simply let my offender off the hook?” If these words have passed your lips or even crossed your mind, be assured that you are not alone. That is precisely why you need to know how to handle “the hook.”

How to Handle “The Hook”

Make a list of all the offenses caused by your offender.

Imagine a meat hook hanging around your neck and a burlap bag hanging from the hook, laying against your chest. Then imagine all the pain caused by the offenses represented as 100 pounds of rocks dropped into the burlap bag. Now you have 100 pounds of heavy rocks—rocks of resentment—hanging from the hook around your neck.

Ask yourself: “Do I really want to carry all this pain with me for the rest of my life?”

Are you willing to take the pain from the past and release it into the hands of the Lord? If so, lift up your pain and release it all to Jesus.

Visualize taking the one who hurt or offended you off of your “emotional hook” and placing that person onto God’s hook.

Remember, the Lord knows how to deal with your offender in His time and in His way. God says, “*It is mine to avenge; I will repay*” (Romans 12:19).

Finally, use the following model and pray to release your offender to God.

Prayer to Forgive Your Offender

*“Lord Jesus, thank you for caring about
how much my heart has been hurt.
You know the pain I have felt because of
(list every offense).*

*Right now I release all that pain into your hands.
Thank you, Lord, for dying on the cross for me
and extending your forgiveness to me.*

*As an act of my will, I choose to forgive (name).
Right now, I move (name) off of
my emotional hook to your hook.
I refuse all thoughts of revenge.*

*I trust that in your time and in your way
you will deal with (name) as you see fit.
And Lord, thank you for giving me your
power to forgive so that I can be set free.
In your precious name I pray. Amen.”*

Genuine Forgiveness

Question: “How do I know whether I have genuinely forgiven someone?”

Answer: Over time, as you go through the process of forgiveness, you may find old thoughts and feelings resurfacing. You may wonder if you’ve really forgiven your offender. It’s completely normal. Ask yourself the following questions:

- “Do I still expect my offender ‘to pay’ for the wrong done to me?”
- “Do I still have bitter feelings toward my offender?”
- “Do I still have vengeful thoughts toward my offender?”
- “Do I desire that my offender will one day come to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and experience a changed life?”
- “When is the last time I prayed for my offender?”

Remember, forgiving someone does not in any way mean that you do not want justice. It simply means that you are leaving the offense entirely in God’s hands. You are refusing to harbor hateful feelings toward your offender. Forgiveness is an ongoing process which requires that you choose to forgive every time the offense comes to mind. Likewise, you choose to pray for the offender every time the offense crosses your mind.

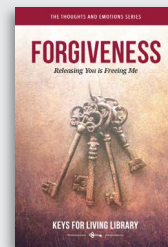
“Pray for those who hurt you.”
(LUKE 6:28 NLT)

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4 POINTS OF GOD'S PLAN

Whether you're trying to make sense of your past, trying to overcome something in the present, or trying to make changes for a better future, the Lord cares about you. He loves you. No matter what challenges you or your loved ones are facing, no matter the pain or difficult feelings you may be experiencing, no matter what you've done or what's been done to you, *there is hope*. And that hope is found in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan for your life, and it begins with a personal relationship with Jesus. The most important decision you can ever make is whether you will accept His invitation. If you have never made that decision, these four simple truths can help you start your journey together with Him.

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”*
(JEREMIAH 29:11)

God's Purpose for You: *Salvation*

What was God's motivation in sending Jesus Christ to earth? To express His love for you by saving you! The Bible says, *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (John 3:16–17).

What was Jesus' purpose in coming to earth? To forgive your sins, to empower you to have victory over sin, and to enable you to live a fulfilled life! Jesus said, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (John 10:10).

The Problem: *Sin*

What exactly is sin? Sin is living independently of God's standard—knowing what is wrong and doing it anyway—also knowing what is right and choosing not to do it. The apostle Paul said, *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway”* (Romans 7:18–19 NLT).

What is the major consequence of sin? Spiritual death, eternal separation from God. The Bible says, *“Your iniquities [sins] have separated you from your God”* (Isaiah 59:2). Scripture also says, *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23).

God's Provision for You: *The Savior*

Can anything remove the penalty for sin? Yes! Jesus died on the cross to personally pay the penalty for your sins. The Bible says, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

What is the solution to being separated from God? Belief in (entrusting your life to) Jesus Christ as the only way to God the Father. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). The Bible says, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . .”* (Acts 16:31).

Your Part: *Surrender*

Give Christ control of your life, entrusting yourself to Him. Jesus said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”* (Matthew 16:24–26).

Place your faith in (rely on) Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and reject your “good works” as a means of earning God’s approval. The Bible says, *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Has there been a time in your life when you know you’ve humbled your heart and received Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—giving Him control of your life? You can tell God that you want to surrender your life to Christ in a simple, heartfelt prayer like this:

*“God, I want a real relationship with you.
I admit that many times I’ve chosen to go my own way instead of your way.
Please forgive me for my sins.
Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins.
Come into my life to be my Lord and my Savior.
Change me from the inside out and make me
the person you created me to be.
In your holy name I pray. Amen.”*

What Can You Now Expect?

When you surrender your life to Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit who empowers you to live a life pleasing to God. The Bible says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life . . .”* (2 Peter 1:3). Jesus assures those who believe with these words:

*“Truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me
has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”*
(JOHN 5:24)

The information in this resource is intended as guidelines for healthy living. Please consult qualified medical, legal, pastoral, and psychological professionals regarding individual concerns.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

God gives us His Word not just for information but for transformation. The Lord wants you to “*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2). This isn’t something you do alone, but something God does in you by His Spirit.

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on the biblical truths in this resource. Take a moment to pray and ask God to settle your mind and quiet your spirit as you reflect on His truth.

*“Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord
will give you insight into all this.”
(2 TIMOTHY 2:7)*

What are two key truths, Bible verses, or “takeaways” from this resource that you found helpful—or that you simply needed to be reminded of?

In relation to this topic, what behavior(s) do you need to *begin*, *change*, or *stop* in order to help you grow into the person God created you to be?

In relation to this topic, what is the biggest obstacle you need to overcome in order to move forward?

What might your life look like a few years from now if you do *not* make changes regarding this issue? How might your life be different if you *do* make changes?

Is there anyone in your life who needs help with this topic/issue? How can you pray for them, and what is one thing you can do to encourage them?

What can you give thanks to God for today?

*“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father, who loved us
and by his grace gave us eternal comfort
and a wonderful hope,
comfort you and strengthen you
in every good thing you do and say.”
(2 THESSALONIANS 2:16–17 NLT)*

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