



A Quick Reference and Lesson Guide

Forgiveness

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1 Scenarios and Assessment

Scenarios/Case Studies

A. Scenario #1

Throughout her childhood, Morgan experienced the trauma of verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse by her father. Years later, he expressed deep remorse over his behavior and asked for her forgiveness, but Morgan struggles to forgive him. Her traumatic memories and the painful situation have negatively affected her marriage.

B. Scenario #2

Rob was part of a successful ministry team led by his mentor, Jim, who was his trusted confidante and friend. After years of working together, Jim inexplicably turned on Rob and eventually terminated his position without any explanation or ethical due process. Jim's betrayal and unethical behavior coupled with the lack of support from the rest of his ministry teammates devastated Rob. His former colleagues seem oblivious to Rob's pain; consequently, he is experiencing a severe faith crisis. Can he forgive those who have hurt him so deeply?

C. Scenario #3

After thirty years of marriage, Carol discovered her husband, Bill, had been engaged in a long-term affair and even fathered a child by his mistress. Bill repented and asked for her forgiveness; however, their marriage remains in crisis mode. Carol wants to forgive Bill, but she has severe trust issues. The situation with Bill's illegitimate child presents further complications.

Definitions and Key Thoughts

A. Facts and Statistics

1. According to a 2011 study in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, unconditional forgiveness can increase one's life span. Conversely, people who practice conditional forgiveness only if the offender says "sorry" first or promises not to repeat the transgression may be more likely to die earlier.
2. Unforgiveness usually leads to increased anger, sadness, 'fight or flight' adrenal arousal, and grudge holding. A 2001 study in the *Psychological Science Journal* found that people holding grudges have higher physiological activity – facial muscle tension, increased heart rates, higher blood pressure, and sweating.
3. A 2005 *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* study showed a connection between forgiveness and improved sleep quality due to reduced tension, anger, and depression.
4. According to a 2011 study of married couples featured in the *Personal Relationships* journal, when the victim in a crisis marital situation forgave the offending spouse, both experienced decreased blood pressure. The researchers say the study suggests that both giving and receiving forgiveness predicts positive physiological functioning.

5. Research presented at a 2011 Society of Behavioral Medicine meeting showed that people who practiced genuine forgiveness toward someone who had hurt them had higher CD4 cell percentages, which are considered positive for the immune system.
6. A recent study from the University of Missouri-Kansas found that truly forgiving a spouse's infidelity is often the key to saving (and even strengthening) the relationship.

B. Dispelling Forgiveness Myths (R. T. Kendall, 2007)

Forgiveness is not

1. approval of the offender's actions,
2. excusing the offender's actions,
3. justification of the offense(s),
4. pardon of the offense(s),
5. reconciliation, (Linda Mintle (2001) astutely observes that forgiveness remains an individual process while reconciliation is an interpersonal process for the purpose of restoring trust between two people. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation. According to Mintle, there are situations when reconciliation could be detrimental and even dangerous for the victim, such as cases of spousal or child abuse. Physical danger as well as emotional and mental harm can result when ongoing abusers refuse to repent and change their ways.)
6. denial or repression of the offensive event(s),
7. forgetting,
8. refusal to take the wrong(s) seriously,
9. pretending there are no hurt or wounds caused by the offense(s).

C. Defining True Forgiveness

1. Merriam-Webster defines forgiveness as
 - a) "giving up resentment of or claim to requital" (forgiving an insult),
 - b) "granting relief from payment of" (forgiving a debt),
 - c) "ceasing to feel resentment against an offender."
2. R. T. Kendall (2007) offers these insights on what true forgiveness is:
 - a) Awareness of a person's offense and still forgiving him/her (Matthew 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Colossians 3:13)
 - b) Choosing to keep no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5)
 - c) Refusing to punish (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30)
 - d) Not engaging in gossip about the offender (Proverbs 17:9; Matthew 18:15-17)
 - e) Extending mercy and grace (Proverbs 11:17; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36; John 8:7-11)
 - f) Absence of bitterness (Ephesians 4:30-32; Hebrews 12:15)
 - g) Includes forgiving God and oneself (1 Peter 4:19)
3. Virginia Holeman (2004) likens forgiveness to an antibiotic and an inoculation. She says, "It is the path by which we heal from relational wounds in our past and our present (antibiotic) and the way we stop ourselves from reenacting these patterns in our future (inoculation)" (pg.153).

Assessment (Interview)

- A. The assessment process will depend on the nature of the forgiveness situation and also whether it involves a married couple in crisis, a family, an individual, or some other circumstance. General questions designed to facilitate the assessment process could include the following:
1. What has brought you here today?
 2. What is your goal in coming to me for help?
 3. Tell me more about your situation – did it take place in the past or is it ongoing in the present?
 - a) Identify the offense(s) and offender(s).
 - b) Honestly address your feelings and actions – What are you doing, feeling, thinking, or feeling in regards to this offense?
 - c) When you act this way, what are you thinking?
 4. What do you want instead of this problem?
 5. How have you tried to resolve this situation in the past?
 6. Tell me about your walk with God and how this situation has affected it.
 7. What do your family, friends, or spouse want for you?
 8. How do your thoughts/actions affect your health? If there are health issues that need to be addressed, encourage the person to make an appointment with their physician.
 9. What are you prepared to do/think differently?
 10. How do you feel about engaging in the process of forgiveness?
 11. How do you define forgiveness? Encourage the person to explore the proper definition of forgiveness – what it is and what it is not.
 12. What sort of action are you willing to take regarding the process of forgiveness?
 13. Do you also desire reconciliation with this person(s)?
 14. Would reconciliation present any potential danger for you or anyone else?
 15. Have you been the victim of any sort of abuse (mental, emotional, verbal, and/or physical) from the offender? *Please see Red Flag section below for questions regarding abuse.*
- B. There are Red Flags for assessing potential abuse that might possibly prohibit reconciliation. The website ywca.org offers the following questions to aid in detecting abuse:
1. Are you frightened by the offender's temper?
 2. Are you afraid to disagree?
 3. Are you constantly apologizing for the offender's behavior, especially when he or she has treated you badly?
 4. Do you have to justify everything you do, everywhere you go, or everyone you see just to avoid the offender's anger?
 5. Does the offender put you down and then tell you that he or she loves you?
 6. Have you ever been hit, kicked, shoved, or had things thrown at you by this person?
 7. Do you not see friends or family because of this person's jealousy?
 8. Has this person ever threatened your life or the life of someone close to you?

2 Critique and Counsel

Biblical Insight

- A. Genesis 50:17-21 provides one of the most powerful biblical illustrations of forgiveness.
 - 1. After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers sought forgiveness. Joseph responded by telling them he was not in God's place. In reality, what they meant for evil, God turned for good and used the situation to save the Messianic line.
 - 2. This narrative shows that Joseph's forgiveness enabled him to put the traumatic offenses in his life into proper perspective.
- B. God can bring redemptive good out of everything, even relational hurts and betrayal.
 - 1. The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) includes the necessity of forgiveness—forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
 - a) Stoop and Masteller (1991) point out that forgiveness begins with God; thus, we simply receive it and pass it on. "In other words, our *forgiveness* flows from our *forgiven-ness*" (pg. 63, italics original).
 - 2. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asked Jesus how often it was necessary to forgive one's offender; "till seven times?" Jesus responded by increasing the forgiveness formula to seventy times seven.
- C. Jesus essentially said that forgiveness is an ongoing, unlimited process. H. Norman Wright (1989) said "Forgiveness involves letting go" and he likens it to a game of tug-of-war because "when someone lets go, the war is over" (pp. 235-236).
 - 1. Forgiveness represents a divine process designed to liberate the offended person from the painful emotional effects caused by the offense. It is a process that one must intentionally engage in and can involve a lengthy amount of time.
 - 2. Forgiveness does not equal forgetfulness. Forgiveness does not remove the memory; it removes the painful sting from the memory.
 - 3. Stoop (1991) says, "The process of forgiveness is complete when what happened between us is no longer a 'live issue' in the way I think of you and relate to you, or in the way I live my life" (pg. 169).
 - 4. Lewis B. Smedes (1984) observes, "You will know that forgiveness has begun *when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well*" (pg. 29, italics original).

Wise Counsel

- A. Dr. David Stoop (1991) offers the following six steps of forgiveness:
 - 1. Recognize the injury – "the process of forgiveness begins when we feel some kind of pain, hurt, or injury" (pg. 169-170). Stoop recommends making an accurate, objective list of wrongs, not to wallow in self-pity but as a foundation for the remaining steps.
 - 2. Identify the emotions involved with the wrongs – there are three types of predominant emotions: fear, guilt (actions) and shame (identity), and anger (pp. 171-172).

3. Express your hurt and anger. This can be accomplished through talk therapy, journaling, and/or writing a letter(s) to the offender to organize your thoughts and clarify emotions. *Do not* send the letter(s).
 4. Set boundaries to protect yourself, which may include keeping your distance from the offender(s). Stoop says working through the forgiveness process may necessitate the establishment of new boundaries to provide “space to work in” (pg. 176).
 5. Cancel the debt. This could include writing “cancelled” on the letter(s) written to the offender(s) or even burying or burning the missives. These kinds of tangible, concrete actions create a memory of a definite time of debt cancellation.
 6. Consider the possibility of reconciliation. Forgiveness is unilateral and does not depend on the offender’s cooperation. Reconciliation is the ideal outcome of the forgiveness process when possible; however, it is not always a possibility.
- B. The forgiveness process leads us to forgive everyone who has hurt us and to also seek and accept forgiveness from those we have harmed. Genuine forgiveness should move in both directions: “from others toward us, from us toward others. Forgiveness is the key to freedom from the effects of our past” (Stoop, 1991, pg. 179).
- C. Couples in Crisis and Forgiveness – Things to Consider
1. Many issues can create couple crisis, not just infidelity.
 2. Oftentimes the presenting problem may not really be the problem. The preceding questions can be modified to help the pastoral caregiver assess the underlying problem(s).
 3. Worthington (2005) says the key to effective counseling is forming and maintaining a good relationship with both partners.
 4. It is important to discern each partner’s agenda because people often play the blame game.
 5. Remain neutral and do not allow yourself to be caught in the middle of the couple’s conflict
 6. As a pastoral caregiver, know your counseling limits.
 7. If the individual’s or couple’s issue is beyond the scope of your experience or skill level, or if it requires long-term intensive assistance, it would be good to refer them to a trusted professional who can provide the necessary help.
 8. Empathize and instill hope. According to Worthington (2005), HOPE is an acronym for Handling Our Problems Effectively and he advocates for the importance of hope-focused counseling. Hope can provide the necessary impetus for needed change.
- D. If any potential abuse exists, reconciliation may not be possible.
1. A victim of abuse would need to get the proper help and protection.
 2. Forgiveness is a personal process, separate from the issue of reconciliation. Reconciliation remains dependent on the reestablishment of trust after relational hurt occurs.
 3. Ongoing abusive behavior would negate the possibility of reestablishing trust.

3

Application and Prayer

Application

- A. According to Worthington (2005), forgiveness constitutes an altruistic act, one that the offender does not deserve. He defines forgiveness “as an altruistic reduction in the desire to distance, seek revenge, or defend oneself and a desire to reconcile if good moral norms can be reestablished” (ch. 9, loc. 3323). The hurtful offense is not minimized or excused, but the forgiver acts in mercy by releasing the debt and refusing to hold a grudge. Worthington uses the acronym REACH for his 5-step forgiveness model:
1. **Recall the hurt** as honestly and objectively as possible.
 2. **Empathize with the other** by exploring the hurtful event from the offender’s perspective. If possible, identify with this person’s thoughts and emotions regarding this event.
 3. **Give the Altruistic gift of forgiveness** – the offended person makes a conscious choice whether or not he/she is ready to forgive. The gift of forgiveness is undeservedly given to the offender, but it truly benefits the forgiver in countless ways.
 4. **Make a public Commitment to forgiving** by telling someone about your decision. The public commitment aids in securing the action of forgiveness within the forgiver’s heart and mind.
 5. **Hold on to forgiveness** even though doubts may come knocking on your door. Remind yourself about your choice to forgive.
- B. Linda Mintle (2001) offers an excellent intervention to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation with couples in crisis. She has both marriage partners make a list of all the offenses committed against one another over the course of their marriage. Mintle then asks them to pray over every item on their list and choose to forgive each offense (Mark 11:25). Since God forgives them, they should extend the same forgiveness to one another (I John 1:9). Next, Mintle has them make a list of each other’s good qualities, their happy times, and positive events during their marriage. She has the spouses exchange these lists and go back to prayer to express thanksgiving to God for each of those blessings. This exercise helps the couple remember those positive qualities and events that are often lost in the fog of marital unhappiness. *This intervention could be modified and used to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation in other situations as well.*

Prayer

“Heavenly Father, thank you for Your merciful compassion bestowed upon us every day. Psalm 130:4 says You offer forgiveness so we can learn the fear of the Lord. Help us to follow Your loving example by offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us. Enable us to work through the process of forgiving and find that place of inner healing. Bind up the wounds and bring us to that place of mental and emotional wholeness. Thank you for being our source of strength and for granting deliverance through the power of Your Spirit. We ask these things with confident assurance that You will hear and answer our prayer because our request is pleasing to You (I John 5:14-15). In Jesus’ precious name, Amen.”

4 Recommended Resources

A. Websites/Internet

1. The Forgiveness Project: <http://theforgivenessproject.com>
2. The Power of Forgiveness: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/emotional-freedom/201109/the-power-forgiveness-why-revenge-doesnt-work>
3. Prepare and Enrich: <https://www.prepare-enrich.com>
4. Forgiveness and Restoration: <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/divorce-and-infidelity/forgiveness-and-restoration/forgiveness-what-it-is-and-what-it-isnt>

B. Recommended Books

- Allender, D. B. (2000). *The healing path: How the hurts in your past can lead you to a more abundant life*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook.
- Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1996). *Safe people: how to find relationships that are good for you and avoid those that aren't*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Haney, Joy (1996). *How to forgive when it's hard to forget*. Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press.
- Holeman, V. T. (2004). *Reconcilable differences: Hope and healing for troubled marriages*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.
- Kendall, R. T. (2007). *Total Forgiveness*. Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House.
- Mintle, L. (2000). *Divorce-proofing your marriage: 10 lies that lead to divorce and 10 truths that will stop it*. Lake Mary, FL: Stang Communications Company.
- Scazzero, P. (2003). *The emotionally healthy church: A strategy for discipleship that actually changes lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Seamands, D. A. (2015). *Healing for damaged emotions*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.
- Seamands, D. A. (1985) *Healing of memories*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- Stoop, D., & Masteller, J. (1991). *Forgiving our parents, forgiving ourselves: Healing adult children of dysfunctional families*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications.
- Worthington, E. L. (2005) *Hope focused marriage counseling: A guide to brief therapy* (2nd ed.). Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

5 Taking it to the Church

“Unlocking the Prison of Pain”

Focus: Forgiveness provides an important key to unlock the prison of pain brought about by life’s traumatic experiences.

Lesson Text:

Genesis 50:15-21 NKJV

“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.’ So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, ‘Before your father died he commanded, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.”’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.” Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

Matthew 6:11-13 NKJV

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

Matthew 18:21-22 NKJV

“Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

Forgiveness Defined

A. The Oxford Dictionary offers these definitions:

1. “Stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw, or mistake”
2. “No longer feel angry about or wish to punish (an offense, flaw, or mistake)”
3. “Cancel (a debt)”

B. Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (1996) says, “Seven words in Scripture denote the idea of forgiveness: three in Hebrew and four in Greek” (pg. 460).

C. The Hebrew Old Testament uses these words—*kipper* meaning to cover; *nāśā* meaning to

bear or take away guilt; *sālah* meaning to pardon. *Nāsā* represents both divine and human forgiveness, but the other two words refer solely to divine forgiveness.

- D. The New Testament word most commonly used for forgiveness is *aphesis* and conveys the idea of sending away or letting go.

R. T. Kendall (2007) offers excellent insight regarding what forgiveness is and is not.

A. Forgiveness *is not*:

1. Approval of the offense
2. Excusing the offense
3. Justification of the offense
4. Releasing the offender from the consequences of the offense
5. Reconciliation [Forgiveness can take place without reconciliation. Linda Mintle (2001) astutely observes that forgiveness remains an individual process while reconciliation is an interpersonal process for the purpose of restoring trust between two people. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation. According to Mintle, there are situations when reconciliation could be detrimental and even dangerous for the victim, such as cases of spousal and/or child abuse. Physical danger as well as emotional and mental harm can result when ongoing abusers refuse to repent and change their ways.]
6. Denial or repression of the offense
7. Forgetting the offense [Forgive and forget is a misnomer. Wiping away the memory of a traumatic event embodies an unrealistic expectation. Kendall states, “It is a demonstration of greater grace when we are fully aware of what occurred—and we still choose to forgive” (pg. 30).]
8. Refusal to take the offense seriously

B. Forgiveness *is*:

1. Being aware of a person’s offense and still forgiving him/her (Matthew 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Colossians 3:13)
2. Choosing to keep no record of wrongs (I Corinthians 13:5)
3. Refusing to punish (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30)
4. Not engaging in gossip about the offender (Proverbs 17:9; Matthew 18:15-17)
5. Extending mercy and grace (Proverbs 11:17; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36; John 8:7-11)
6. Absence of bitterness (Ephesians 4:30-32; Hebrews 12:15)
7. Includes forgiving God and oneself (I Peter. 4:19)

Understanding Forgiveness within the Biblical Context

The story of Joseph provides a powerful scriptural example of forgiveness. As Jacob’s favored son, Joseph received a special coat from his father, one that signified his special status within the clan. Dr. Claude Mariottini, an OT scholar, says in his July 1, 2014, blog posting that Joseph’s coat, *ketonet passim*, appears to be a long-sleeved garment associated with royalty, high-ranking palace officials, or a person with an exalted societal position. The coat signified that Joseph occupied an exalted position in Jacob’s affections and he considered him to be above all his other sons. Jacob’s favoritism fomented envy and resulted in the betrayal of Joseph. Acts 7: 9 states, “***And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him.***” Jacob was ultimately betrayed as well when his sons lied and presented false evidence of Joseph’s apparent death.

Imagine Joseph's terror when his brothers assaulted him, threw him in the pit, and then sold him into slavery. Consider how it felt for this sheltered son of a wealthy desert sheik to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. After a period of time in Potiphar's house, a sense of normalcy finally prevailed, only to be shattered by betrayal once again, this time by a lying woman with evil intent. Think about the frightening thoughts and emotions that must have engulfed Joseph as he was thrown into prison. Yet, Acts 7:9 reminds us, "***But God was with him.***" These series of events provided the necessary tools to mold and shape Joseph for his ultimate destiny. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wisely observed, "The worst thing that can happen to a man is to succeed before he is ready."

Each of those events prepared, then positioned Joseph for the fulfillment of his dreams, but he could have short-circuited God's process at any time. He could have allowed slavery to bind up his blessing or success could have resulted in his succumbing to sexual advances. The prison could have destroyed his spirit. What if Joseph had a pity party instead of responding correctly? He would never have been in a position to interpret the dreams of the butler and baker. Joseph had to be Egypt's prisoner before he could become Egypt's governor. In time, the iron fetters on his feet resulted in the golden chain being draped around his neck. Joseph was free from the pit of offense and the prison of pain long before he escaped the iron gates of Egypt's incarceration. Somewhere along the line, he learned to let go of the bitterness and forgive his betrayers. Forgiveness enabled Joseph to put life's traumatic experiences into proper perspective. The names chosen for his two sons illustrate this principle, ***Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." And the name of the second he called Ephraim: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction"*** (Genesis 41:51-52).

Nevertheless, Joseph's forgiveness did not mean he approved, excused, justified, denied, forgot his brothers' offense, or refused to take it seriously. Many often interpret his actions as some sort of payback; however, Joseph actually let them experience the consequences of their offense. Genesis 42:21-22 bears this out, ***Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us."***

In addition to forgiving his brothers, Joseph eventually reconciled with them. Reconciliation is the ideal outcome of the forgiveness process whenever possible. Forgiveness represents a unilateral process; however, reconciliation is an interpersonal process for the purpose of restoring trust between the offended person and his/her offender(s). Their respective responses and actions allowed Joseph to see whether trust could be reestablished for the purpose of reconciliation. Notice how he especially created a scenario involving his younger brother, Benjamin, who now held that special place in Jacob's affections, so he could see whether they had changed. Genesis 44:14 states that Judah and his brothers all returned to plead on Benjamin's behalf. Moreover, Judah became the prime mediator since he pledged himself to his father as the guarantor of Benjamin's safe return. It is interesting to note that the biblical narrative focuses in on this key point since Judah was the one who originally instigated selling

Joseph to the Ishmaelites in contrast to Rueben who wanted to rescue his brother (Genesis 37:22-30). Joseph's response and actions towards his brothers were especially designed so he could gauge their trustworthiness. Upon seeing the obvious change within his brothers, Joseph could no longer hide his identity as he made himself known to them and initiated the reconciliation process.

Kendall (2007) offers an excellent application for Joseph's example of forgiveness in Genesis 45 and 50:

- Joseph did not publicize his brothers' evil offense (Genesis 45:1).
- Joseph allayed his brothers' fears (Genesis 45:4).
- Joseph wanted his brothers to forgive themselves and not remain guilt-ridden (Genesis 45:5).
- Joseph allowed his brothers to save face (Genesis 45:6).
- Joseph saved them from their greatest fear – telling their father the truth (Genesis 45:9-13).
- Joseph's forgiveness was a lifelong commitment (Genesis 50:19-21).

“Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom.” (Hannah Arendt)

Forgiveness Within the Modern Context

Corrie Ten Boom said, “Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate. It is the power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.” Her powerful words reflect her own experience. Cornelia "Corrie" ten Boom was a Dutch watchmaker and Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. Consequently, she was imprisoned for her actions. Corrie and her family were subjected to the Nazis' cruelty and experienced horrible atrocities, including the death of her sister, Betsie. While speaking in a Munich church about forgiveness, she recognized a man in the audience as one of the guards from Ravensbrück, the concentration camp where she was incarcerated and where her sister died. When the man approached and asked for her forgiveness, Corrie wanted to condemn him as icy feelings of anger, hurt, and repulsion welled up inside her heart.

Recalling that experience, she said, “But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't. If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.”

Matthew 18:21-22 highlights this ongoing process of forgiveness, “*Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’*” Jesus essentially said that forgiveness is an ongoing, unlimited process. H. Norman Wright (1989) said “Forgiveness involves letting go” and he likens it to a game of tug-of-war because “when someone lets go, the war is over” (pp. 235-236).

- A. Forgiveness represents a divine process designed to liberate the offended person from the painful emotional effects caused by the offense. It is a process that one must intentionally engage in and can involve a lengthy amount of time.
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- E. Virginia Holeman (2004) likens forgiveness to an antibiotic and an inoculation. She says, “It is the path by which we heal from relational wounds in our past and our present (antibiotic) and the way we stop ourselves from reenacting these patterns in our future (inoculation)” (pg.153). Failure to forgive allows the offender to occupy rent-free space in your mind but forgiveness removes the offender’s ability to inflict further pain.

Practical Application for Today

Dr. David Stoop (1991) offers the following six steps of forgiveness:

- Recognize the injury. “The process of forgiveness begins when we feel some kind of pain, hurt, or injury” (pg. 169-170). Stoop recommends making an accurate, objective list of wrongs, not to wallow in self-pity but as a foundation for the remaining steps.
- Identify the emotions involved with the wrongs. There are three types of predominant emotions: fear, guilt (actions) and shame (identity), and anger (pp. 171-172).
- Express your hurt and anger. This can be accomplished through talk therapy, journaling, and/or writing a letter(s) to the offender to organize your thoughts and clarify emotions. *Do not* send the letter(s).
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- Cancel the debt. This could include writing “cancelled” on the letter(s) written to the offender(s) or even burying or burning the missives. These kinds of tangible, concrete actions create a memory of a definite time of debt cancellation.
- Consider the possibility of reconciliation. Forgiveness is unilateral and does not depend on the offender’s cooperation. Reconciliation is the ideal outcome of the forgiveness process when possible; however, it is not always a possibility.

In Conclusion

The forgiveness process leads us to forgive everyone who has hurt us and to also seek and accept forgiveness from those we have harmed. Genuine forgiveness should move in both directions: from others toward us, from us toward others. Like Joseph, your problems, your prison of pain could position you to minister to others when they reach a place of need in their lives. It is all about our response. Cherie Carter-Scott wisely observed, “Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were.” The key of deliverance is in our hand and the doors of pain’s prison will swing wide open when we insert the key of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the key to freedom from the effects of our past” (Stoop, 1991, pg. 179). This key can unlock our future and position us for blessing. Moreover, Joseph’s story teaches us that God can take what others meant for evil and turn it for our good.